Stephen Ashton's Dragon

Ellen A. Bennett.

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See page 114.

STEPHEN ASHTON'S DRAGON

BY

ELLEN A. BENNETT

'Grieve not for thy woes,
Disgrace and trouble,
For He who honour best bestows
May give thee double.'
Marmion.

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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	HERCULES	7
II.	LITTLE SID	22
III.	THE DRAGON	35
IV.	VICTOR OR VANQUISHED?	47
V.	TRIED IN THE FIRE	59
VI.	ALONE	71
VII.	VICTORIOUS HERCULES	81
VIII.	'AS WE FORGIVE THEM'	95
IX.	FAITHFUL AND TRUE	107
X.	BRAVE AND STRONG	122
XI.	'AS HE WOULD WISH'	136
XII.	'WHAT HE DOES IS RIGHT'	147

STEPHEN ASHTON'S DRAGON

CHAPTER I

HERCULES

'I REALLY do think you had better not have anything more to do with me. I don't believe any man in the world ever had such an abominable temper as I have. I'm certain you had much better have done with me. Now, don't you think so yourself?'

'No, I don't,' was the half-laughing reply; then, more seriously, 'not as long as you try to get the better of it, Stephen.'

'Try!' repeated the first speaker. 'What's the use of trying? The last time Mr. Bevan spoke to me I promised I would not get into a rage again, and I did try—upon my word I did. But it seems as if I couldn't help it. I've a good mind to give it all up and'— he paused, and threw a handful of pebbles into the stream that was flowing at their feet. His companion looked thoughtful, but said nothing.

It was a lovely summer evening after an intensely hot day, and Stephen Ashton, who worked hard all the week in the hot, dusty atmosphere of a factory, was enjoying to the full his evening rest. This was his favourite spot, and on most summer evenings he was to be found lying on the bank of the little stream, regarding with keen interest the curious creatures to be seen in it. Many of his leisure hours were spent in watching the tiny fish darting hither and thither, and peering at him with their tiny sharp eyes as though on friendly terms with him; the little red spiders, the queer-looking water-boatmen, rowing themselves along in a desperate hurry; the merry little water-beetles, making their never-ending circles on the surface of the water, while occasionally large specimens would rise solemnly to the top, and, returning hastily, bury themselves again in the mud, as though disgusted with the unceasing movements of their whirling relatives.

At the top of the bank was a broad footpath running along one side of a large meadow, with fine trees scattered about it, and on the other side a substantial farmhouse; its well-stocked yard, sleek horses, and contentedly-ruminating cows, all betokening a prosperous owner. For many generations had Ash Tree Farm descended from father to son in unabated prosperity, and the present master had been no exception to the rule. Of late years, however, he had sustained a heavy loss in the deaths of a much-

loved wife and son, and now concentrated all his affection on his 'boy Jack' and his daughter Annie, who strove with all her power to make him happy. If a good daughter makes, as is surely true, a good wife, Stephen Ashton, as he lay on the ground at her feet, had good cause to be thankful that from all the young men who would fain have won her, Annie Morris had chosen him. Just now, as she sat on the fallen trunk of a tree, she was looking down at him with a doubtful expression on her pleasant face, as if wishing to say something and hardly knowing how to say it.

Presently Stephen looked up at her. 'Of course, I didn't mean that,' he said hastily, knowing well what she was thinking. 'I know I must go on trying; and Mr. Bevan says I shall get the better of it, if I try in the right way. It's not all my fault, though, on my honour; the other fellows do all they can to put me in a rage—they like to "get a rise out of Ashton," as they say. It's because I'm so big.'

'So big!' repeated Annie, laughing. 'Why?'

'They want to see what I'll do,' said Stephen; 'and then when they have roused me they're all in terror, as if a lion had got loose among them. Smith is the worst, always taunting me with'— he stopped abruptly and coloured. 'But I've shut him up for the present, I reckon; he got rather more than he bargained for. What do you think I did with him?'

'Nothing very bad, I hope,' said Annie anxiously.

'I held him out of the window by the collar of his coat.'

'Stephen!'

'I did indeed. He had been bothering me for ever so long, and all the other fellows were urging him on. I told him he'd better shut up, but he wouldn't; so I dragged him to the window and held him out of it. You should have seen his face!'

'Stephen, how could you? He might have been killed. Such a tremendous height too.'

'The collar of his coat was pretty strong,' Stephen said carelessly, 'and there was no harm done, though the men made a fearful row about it—not at the time; they were too frightened, the idiots! Of course I didn't mean to hurt him, and I was sorry afterwards, Annie. I told Smith so; but he's a beast, that fellow. He wouldn't shake hands, and kept telling the others I meant to murder him. I don't care a rap what any of them say, though, except Williams, and he said'—he paused and looked gloomily at the water.

'What?' asked Annie, leaning forward and stroking his dark, curly hair.

'Williams is a good fellow, and no mistake,' Stephen went on. 'He never says a word to annoy one, and he didn't join in what the others were saying, but when we were coming out he said, "They had no right to bully you, lad, but such a temper as yours is a terrible trial, and you ought to be very careful. If your hand had shaken or Smith's coat given way,

you know well what would have happened. You're powerful strong, but you ought not to use your strength to terrify your fellow-men." If they were all like old Williams, I should get on splendidly.'

'Yes,' said Annie slowly; 'but then if you were not tempted, Stephen, there wouldn't be much credit in not giving way. I think it would be ever so much grander to get the better of it when the others are tormenting you, than if it were all smooth and easy.'

'If I *could*,' observed Stephen; 'but it doesn't look much like it. That was only last week, and yesterday I had a row with Mr. Charles.'

'Oh, Stephen! not really!' exclaimed Annie, much distressed. 'What about?'

'I didn't put *him* out of window,' laughed the other. 'No, I don't want to make fun of it, Annie; I am very much vexed about it. Mr. Charles hated me enough before, and now, of course, he'll be worse. He came and found fault with my work, and told me I had no business to be doing it. As it happened, Mr. Spencer had set me on at it, but, instead of telling him so civilly, I must needs get into a temper, like an idiot! and I told him I couldn't take orders from half a dozen masters at once, and if he didn't choose me to obey his father, I— There! now you're vexed about it. Didn't I tell you that you had much better have nothing to do with me?'

'What did Mr. Charles say?' asked Annie, taking no notice of his last remark.

'He didn't say anything, luckily for me, or I should have gone on from bad to worse; but I knew very well what Mr. Bevan would say, so I just had to make up my mind to do it.'

'To do what?'

'Eat humble pie, to be sure,' said Stephen, shrugging his shoulders. 'I went into the office as I came away and told Mr. Charles I was sorry I had spoken like that to him, and I hoped he would excuse it; but I didn't get much for my pains.'

'I am so glad you did,' exclaimed Annie heartily. 'I'm sure it was the right thing to do, and that is all that signifies.'

'Mr. Charles said, "You don't want to get discharged, eh, Ashton? then you had better mind you are not insolent to me again;" and then he went on with his writing and took no more notice. He knew very well *that* was not why I said it, but I know I deserved to catch it. I should have turned off a fellow who had spoken to me like that, if I had been in his place. But Mr. Charles is always down upon me; he finds fault with my work and grumbles about something nearly every time he sees me, simply because he doesn't like me. He knows I'm a good workman and I'm never absent or late; that's what makes me so angry. If I deserved it, I shouldn't mind; but I cannot stand being blamed unjustly.'

'It must be very hard, Stephen; but I suppose, when people blame us unjustly, it must be meant to do us good in some way.'

'I don't see how it can do one good,' said Stephen. 'I don't mean a little fault-finding like Mr. Charles'—that only makes one cross at the time. But I think a really unjust accusation would do one harm; it makes one so—so— Well, I think it would make me hate everyone—it would make me downright wicked.'

'I hope nothing would do that, Stephen,' said a voice behind them, causing Stephen to look round hastily.

'Good-evening, sir,' he exclaimed, as he sprang up and touched his hat. 'I did not hear you coming.'

'You were so deep in your conversation,' said the new-comer, smiling. 'Now, I should very much like to know, Stephen, what it is that would have such a terribly bad effect upon you.'

Stephen hesitated, not knowing quite how to express himself, and looked at Annie for help.

'We were talking about being blamed unjustly, sir,' said Annie. 'Stephen said he thought an unjust accusation would make one wicked, because it would make one so angry with everyone.'

'Annie says it ought to do one good,' added Stephen, 'but I'm sure it would make me feel as if I should like to be revenged on someone.'

'The question is, how far we can honestly say it *is* unjust,' said Mr. Bevan, seating himself on the end of

the log of wood. 'I mean, though we may be unjustly accused in one particular case, we may have been guilty of other faults of the same kind, and therefore we cannot help acknowledging that it is no more than we deserve.'

'You mean, sir, that if a fellow is in the habit of taking little things, he has no right to complain if he is accused wrongfully of some great theft.'

'Precisely,' said Mr. Bevan, smiling at Stephen's way of illustrating the subject. 'And, more than that, no one can say he is so perfect as not to deserve blame for any fault, and so we must own that, though it is man's injustice, it is God's justice. Perhaps it may be sent to prove us, whether by bearing it patiently and rightly we shall come out of the trial with a character strengthened and brightened, like "gold tried in the fire." It may be sent in love, to enable us to get the better of some failing or sin which would have dragged us down, and which God knows this alone would check. Then, if accepted rightly,—not with anger, as an unjust punishment from man, but as a loving correction from God,—it will indeed prove a blessing. For what reason it is sent we may not know, but this we do know, since He permits it, it is right, and that what "is right comes right" in His good time.'

'But sometimes it never does come right,' said Stephen hesitatingly; 'sometimes people are never cleared.'

'Then we must have faith to look higher still, even beyond this world, and to believe that it had some good purpose, though we could not understand it;' and Mr. Bevan added musingly, as if more to himself than to his companions, 'There are many things that we can only see "through a glass darkly" and know "in part."'

There was a short silence, only broken by the murmurs of the stream. Stephen Ashton was apparently thinking over what the rector had said, and when Mr. Bevan looked up at him he was struck by the expression of his face, and, knowing him as well as he did, he had no difficulty in guessing his thoughts.

'It might, perhaps, make it harder if it seemed to be only a matter of personal spite, so to say—a bit of malice of someone who disliked us; but one who was bearing the trial as sent by God would not find it difficult to forgive his fellow-men their share in it. Although you say, Stephen, that you think it would make you wicked and revengeful, I am sure if you felt so at first, you would be willing enough afterwards to forgive anyone who had wronged you.'

'Oh yes, of course,' said Stephen, 'I shouldn't bear malice against a fellow;' then, colouring slightly, he went on, with a little laugh, 'But I'm not likely to have the chance of forgiving anyone; it's more likely they'll have to forgive me, seeing what a firebrand I am.'

Mr. Bevan knew that, in spite of constant failures, Stephen was striving bravely to get the better of his enemy, and in his heart felt that the men who persisted in rousing his temper and irritating him beyond endurance had as much need of his forgiveness as he had of theirs. He had noticed that lately Stephen had often talked in a despairing tone, as if he had begun to think it was useless to struggle any longer, so he said cheerfully—

'Perhaps they have, just at present, Stephen; but after a while you will not give them any cause for it. We all have some dragon to conquer, you know, and that temper of yours is your particular dragon, my Hercules.'

Stephen laughed.

'I think it is a great pity I am a Hercules, sir. If I were not, as Williams says, so "powerful strong," a good many of them would like me much better.'

'Smith, for instance?' asked Mr. Bevan, looking at Stephen with some amusement and a great deal of regret.

Stephen turned away his head.

'I really am afraid of what I may do some day,' he said in a low tone. 'I don't think I shall ever get the better of my dragon. I'm afraid he will get the better of me, and make me do something dreadful.'

'You must go on fighting harder and harder against him,' said the rector. 'If Hercules had given up when he saw the dragon's heads appear again as fast

as he knocked them off, he would have been conquered, instead of coming off victorious. However many heads your dragon has, you can overcome him at last with the help of One who is stronger than the enemy. Suppose you try and remember that your strength is given you by God, and ask Him to keep you from making a bad use of it, and to help you to use it, as He would wish, for the benefit of your fellow-men. But I must not stay chatting here any longer, though this is a very pleasant place for a rest. How does this hot weather suit your father, Annie?'

'He feels it a great deal, sir; he is not so strong as he used to be. The least worry seems to make him ill, and it is so difficult to keep all the little worries of the farm from him.'

'I am sure you do your best to save him from them,' said Mr. Bevan kindly. 'He told me the other day you took all the trouble you could off his shoulders. Good-evening, Annie. There is little Sidney coming to look for you, I think. Good-evening, Hercules. I prophesy that some day you will find a good use for your strength, and make us all proud of you.'

'I hope I may. I'll try and not do any harm with it, at any rate,' said Stephen, brightening up. 'Good-evening, sir.'

Mr. Bevan, as he left them and walked slowly along the path, thought over Stephen's remarks, and wondered whether it would not be better to urge him,

as he had done once before, to leave Arlingham and begin life afresh where he had not incurred any dislike, and might meet with less provocation. But wherever he went he would meet with temptation, and the rector felt that in a strange place he would be deprived of Annie's influence, and of his own frequent warnings and encouragements to persevere. Stephen himself could not bear the idea of leaving the place where he had lived all his life; and Mr. Bevan, on his own account, would have been very sorry to lose him, and would sorely have missed his face and voice from the church choir, in which Stephen had sung ever since the day when, quite a little boy, he had, to his great delight, been admitted to that privilege.

Perhaps no one, not even Annie Morris, knew him quite so well or understood him so thoroughly as the clergyman who had watched over him from childhood to boyhood, from boyhood to manhood; into whose ever-ready ears he had poured all his troubles, all his regrets at his many failures, and who was always ready to sympathise with him and encourage him, though he warned him that such a terrible temper, if not carefully checked, would surely bring upon him some sorrow and punishment.

Poor Stephen was terribly distressed at his own violence, and, after some particularly wild outbreak, would watch over himself carefully, and avoid all subjects likely to lead to a quarrel. He was a warm-

hearted, affectionate young fellow, always ready to do a kindness, and, as soon as his temper had cooled down, was always eager to 'make it up,' and would often put himself to great inconvenience to do a service for someone he had just been abusing.

But, unhappily, two years before, Stephen had lost the sympathy and influence of a good and loving mother, and the rector had heard of two or three things lately that had made him very anxious, knowing how easily one act of uncontrolled passion and violence might hurry him into some deed that would sadden or ruin his whole life. Most earnestly did he hope and pray that Stephen might learn to control and check his temper, before it had made him, as he said, 'do something dreadful.' Little did he think how soon he was to receive a sudden check, and where and in what way poor Stephen was to be taught to subdue every appearance of temper.

CHAPTER II

LITTLE SID

'HOW kind he is!' remarked Stephen, watching Mr. Bevan till he disappeared in the distance. 'He always cheers one up, doesn't he?'

'Indeed he does,' returned Annie warmly, and then she sighed.

Stephen turned to her hastily.

'What is it?' he asked. 'Jack again?'

'I'm afraid he is in some trouble or other, Stephen; he has been worse than ever the last few days. Luckily, father goes to bed early and does not see him come in, but last Thursday I didn't know what to do with him. Yesterday he declared he would be off and get away from it all; but he won't tell me what is the matter, or what he means. I'm afraid every day that he will go off without saying anything.'

'I don't think he would do that,' said Stephen.

'Perhaps he is in some little mess just now, but I'm sure he is too fond of you to go far wrong.'

'I don't know about that; and it will break father's heart if he hears how he is going on. I'm quite certain if Jack got into disgrace it would kill father.'

Stephen nodded gravely. He knew a great deal more about the matter than he cared to say, knowing how it would grieve Annie.

'I don't think it would do any good for me to talk to him,' he said; 'last time I tried, he was only angry at my interfering. But I tell you what I'll do, Annie. I've got a bit of money put by, and of course Jack is welcome to it, if it's any trouble of that kind. If I can get the chance, I'll tell him so.'

'Oh, Stephen, how good of you! but I don't see why you should sacrifice yourself for Jack.'

'I'd be glad to save your father any trouble I could; he has always been very good to me. Besides, it is only right I should do what you would do, and you know you would not hesitate to do anything for him.'

'No, I would not,' said Annie earnestly. 'He has had a great deal of trouble lately, and now he is getting old I would endure anything if I could keep any more sorrow away from him.'

Stephen looked at her for a moment.

'*Anything?*' he repeated; 'then, of course, Annie, as this money is ours, it can go to Jack, if it is any good. Don't worry yourself, I daresay it will be

all right. Hulloa, little Sid! Found us at last, have you?'

'Aunt Annie, it's supper-time,' shouted a little voice, and a boy about six years old threw himself headlong into Stephen's arms. 'Uncle Stephen, put me up on your shoulder, please. Grandfather said I might come and fetch you and have a ride round the yard before I go to bed, because I was such a good boy in church.'

'That's right, old fellow,' said Stephen, catching him up and tossing him in the air.

'I knew the hymn, and I sang it,' went on Sidney triumphantly. 'I'm coming to sing with you soon, Uncle Stephen. I'm a big boy now.'

'I should think he would do soon, don't you, Annie?'

'Yes; we must ask Mr. Bevan about it. He reads and sings very nicely now,' said Annie proudly.

Little Sidney, the orphan child of her elder brother, was the pride and delight of her heart, as he was of her father's; but, happily, they were both wise enough not to let their affection for him lead them to indulge him too much, and the little fair-haired boy was the pet and plaything of the whole house, and a special favourite with 'Uncle Stephen,' as he persisted in calling him.

'Here's such a beautiful stick,' he announced. 'Where's your jolly big knife? Cut it for me, Uncle Stephen; it will just do to whip you with!'

'That's a good idea, too,' said Stephen, laughing and searching in his pockets. 'I don't seem to have got my knife, Sid. I suppose I left it at home. Oh no, I didn't, though. I remember now; I lent it to'—

'Oh, look! look!' interrupted Sidney. 'Do look at that wee little fish with a red tail.'

'A robin red-tail among the fishes!' laughed Stephen.

'Oh, catch him! catch him! do!' shouted the child, as Stephen lay down and, putting his hand into the brook, drove the little stickleback into the bank.

'He's too sharp to be caught, Sid. See how cunning he looks; he knows he can dart away out of reach in an instant. There, he's off! Come along now, Sid, Aunt Annie wants to go in. Up you go,' and Stephen swung the little fellow up on his shoulder.

'How high I am!' said Sidney, 'ever so much higher than you, auntie. Uncle Stephen is such a big man. Shall I be as big and strong as you when I'm grown up? I should like to be. Mr. Bevan said the other day you were *Hercles*. What does he mean by that? What is a *Hercles*?'

'Hercules was a big fellow, and so strong—ever so strong; and one day he wanted to conquer a horrid creature called a dragon, but every time he knocked off its head and thought he had killed it, another head came in its place; and just as he

thought he had gained the victory, he had to begin again.'

'Did he win at last?' asked Sidney, much interested.

'Yes, he went on and on till there were no more heads, and the dragon was killed.'

Sidney pondered a minute.

'Are you going to knock off heads, then, Uncle Stephen? Mr. Bevan said he hoped you would be like him; but there are no dragons now, are there?'

'Not real dragons. Mr. Bevan meant that when we want to do anything wrong, that is a dragon's head, and we must cut it off, and not do it.'

'I'll cut off all his heads when I'm big,' said Sidney valiantly. 'But I shan't call you Hercules; I like Stephen better. Aunt Annie told me about St. Stephen. Shall you be St. Stephen some day?'

'No, indeed, not I,' said Stephen, a little sadly. 'We have to be very good to be like the saints, Sid.'

'But you can be good,' said the child confidently, 'and you can be a little like St. Stephen at any rate.'

'Yes, perhaps,' returned Stephen. 'Now, Sid, off we go,' and he ran off, with the boy shrieking with delight, while Annie followed more slowly.

'Come in to supper, lad,' said Farmer Morris, when, breathless and hot, Stephen arrived at the door, refusing Sidney's entreaties for one more ride round. 'It's all ready, and Annie's waiting. You've had a splendid ride, Sidney, now you must be off to

bed. It's fine to be young and able to rush about like that,' he continued, looking admiringly at Stephen's tall figure as he leant against the door-post. 'I should think, now, there aren't many who could stand up to you, if you were to mean mischief!'

'There are not many about here who would like to try!' said Stephen, laughing, as he followed the farmer into the kitchen. 'None of them would like to tackle me, barring the police, and they wouldn't care for the job! Jackson said the other day they would have to turn out the whole force if I was "wanted." I ought to have been a hardy Norseman, and ruled the stormy sea, oughtn't I, Annie? I believe they had a fine time of it.'

'Or perhaps you'd have liked to have tried cracks with "Stout Tom of Thorndale" that my grandad used to tell of,' observed the farmer, sitting down in his large old-fashioned armchair, and helping himself liberally to salt beef and potatoes, and pushing the dish to Stephen. 'He said his grandfather knew Stout Tom well, and that he could pull a strong horse backward, and as for wrestling, there was no one could beat him. Grandfather said his father, when he was a small chap, had seen Stout Tom, when he had thrown a man, pick him up in his arms and jump over a six-barred gate with him. But a story never loses in the telling!'

'My word, he must have been a strong fellow! exclaimed Stephen. 'I wonder if I could do that.

I carried that Irish fellow round the yard the other day, and put him up on one of those high pillars by the gates, and there he had to wait till I got him down again!'

'How did he take it?' asked the farmer, with a chuckle.

'Oh, he was awfully riled at first,' laughed Stephen. 'He'd been chaffing me, and I put him up there out of the way; and then he did gabble, to be sure. "Sure he'd give it me when he got down. Just let him catch me when he'd got his shillaleh, and he'd break my head for me." And then all of a sudden he began to laugh. "Och, sure!" he says, "what would the folks in dear old Oireland say, if they could see Tim O'Brien stuck up here like a weather-cock on the top of a staple! Here, let me down, lad, before any o' my chums get back, or I'll be foinely laughed at. You're a broth of a boy! and sure I'd raythor have you on my soide on St. Patrick's day than foighting aginst me."'

'He didn't want to quarrel, then,' said Annie anxiously.

'Not a bit. He told the others they had better mind what they were at, or "that Ashton feller" would put them up on the top of the church tower, or maybe higher.'

'I wouldn't try that too often, though,' said the farmer. 'Some of them cantankerous-sort of chaps might turn rusty and do you a bad turn some of these days.'

'Yes, that's true,' returned Stephen, thinking of Smith; 'but I can't help it, so it's no use. If they put my back up, I'm sure to let fly, however much I try not to. If they would leave me alone I should be all right, and I don't want to quarrel with any of them. If Mr. Charles would speak civilly to me, I'd do anything he wants; but when he speaks in that domineering tone, I'm sure to lose my temper and answer back. I shall always do that, I expect, if anyone tries to ride roughshod over me.'

'That won't help you to get along in the world,' the old farmer said, quietly. 'Take my advice lad, and learn to take a lick from the rough side of the tongue as well as the smooth, and get the better of that temper of yours. I'd be powerful sorry to see you get into trouble; there's naught would vex me more, saving anything wrong with my own boy. Where is Jack, Annie? Gone for a stroll?'

'Yes, father,' answered Annie, rather reluctantly. 'He went off just after tea.'

'He's main fond of a walk,' said his father contentedly; 'but boys must have a bit of a chat with other lads now and then.'

Annie assented; but she thought to herself that it would be better for Jack if he and the others did not invariably end the chats in the public-house. She said nothing, however, and Farmer Morris fell to discussing with Stephen the weather, the crops, the cattle, and such like topics till supper was over.

Then he settled himself in his chair for a nap till it was time to go to bed, while Stephen stood for a few minutes at the door with Annie, before going back to the cottage where he had lived alone since his mother's death.

'I'm afraid Jack will be worse than ever to-night,' said Annie in a low tone. 'He has gone with that young Soden, and he'll be sure to get him to drink. I don't know whatever to do with him. Father will be certain to find out some day, if Jack will go on like this.'

'Perhaps something will make him turn over a new leaf soon,' said Stephen hopefully. 'I'll do my best with him, Annie, if I can get him to listen to me. I may see him as I go down the town, and I'll try and persuade him to come home. I must be off, I suppose, but it's so quiet and happy here, I'd like to stay here always.'

'Yes,' assented Annie, 'it's a pretty place; but it seems to me there's sure to be trouble everywhere,' and she sighed. 'If Jack would only be steady, and'—

'Stephen would keep his temper,' put in Stephen, a little saucily. 'Well, I will try, Annie, I promise you. Maybe something will make me turn over a new leaf too; who knows?'

There is many a true word spoken in jest, and it would seem many a prophecy spoken in jest also, and, had Stephen but known it, his lightly-uttered words

were indeed like the shadow of coming events. Perhaps Annie instinctively felt this.

'Don't, Stephen,' she said, with a slight shiver.

'All right, I won't joke about it. Good-night, Annie; there's father waking up, and I must go.'

He walked briskly off, stopping at the farmyard gate to wave his hand to Annie, who watched from the door till he was out of sight. Little did either of them imagine how many weary months would pass before they met in those pleasant fields again. It was a pleasant evening for a walk, and Stephen found it so enjoyable that he soon slackened his pace, and sauntered slowly along the path by the stream. He was so much interested in inspecting the curious cases of some caddis worms, that he forgot how time passed, so that, though the distance between Ash Tree Farm and the town of Arlingham was not great, it was getting late when he reached it. His little cottage stood in a lane leading from the principal street to the lower end of the town, and just as he reached it, he became aware that what he called a 'very pretty row' was going on at a public-house a short distance beyond the turning.

'What's up there, Walter?' he inquired of a lad who came up at that moment.

'A lot of fellows kicking up a row because Simpson wants them to turn out,' answered the lad. 'Some of them are very far gone, young Soden especially, and he's just shied a glass at Simpson's head. Caught

him a good one, too, and Simpson sent for a policeman. There will be something to pay presently, I reckon. I shall clear off,' and he went hastily on.

Soden! and where Soden was, there probably was Jack Morris; and if he were taken up, Annie's worst fears would be fulfilled. Even as the thought crossed his mind, he was striding in the direction of the public. And not a moment too soon. As he reached it, amid a storm of abuse, Jack Morris was hurled into the road, almost into the arms of the policeman, who was hurrying to the spot. Furious with anger, and too tipsy to know what he was about, Jack struck out violently, and would inevitably have assaulted the constable, had not Stephen interposed.

'No, you don't,' he exclaimed, placing himself full in Jack's way, and receiving the blow on his arm, and seizing him by the arms, he held him firmly, in spite of Jack's struggles.

'Leave him to me, will you, Jackson?' he went on, turning to the policeman. 'There's no need to get him into a row. I'll take him home and keep him out of mischief.'

The man nodded, and disappeared into the house.

'You're a nice young man,' continued Stephen, 'and if I gave you your deserts, I should leave you in a ditch till morning; but I suppose I've got to bundle you home somehow.'

This was easier said than done, as Jack was determined to fight someone, though it seemed a

matter of indifference to him who his antagonist might be, and it took him some minutes to find out that it was perfectly useless to struggle with Stephen. Then he announced his intention of going back for another glass, and finally wished Stephen 'Good-night' with much drunken solemnity, and lay down in the road. But Stephen's superior height and strength stood him in good stead, and pulling him up he roused him with a rough shake, and half-dragged, half-carried him towards the farm.

He was just turning into the fields, congratulating himself that he had met no one on the way who knew them and would be likely to tell tales of Jack, when, to his great annoyance, he saw Mr. Charles Spencer coming along the road from the opposite direction. He sincerely hoped they might escape his notice, but an unlucky lurch of Jack brought him so nearly into collision with young Spencer, that he had to stop to avoid it.

'Ah! it's you, is it, Ashton?' he said contemptuously. 'It's not the first time I've suspected you were given to this sort of thing.'

Stephen made no reply, but contented himself with interposing between Mr. Spencer and Jack, to prevent his recognising him.

'This accounts for your behaviour to me, I suppose. A nice thing for a choir-man on a Sunday to be reeling about the roads at this time of night! Suppose I tell Mr. Bevan?'

'You can tell him what you please, sir,' said Stephen, keeping his temper with an effort. 'He will believe me when I say that I was *not* reeling about.'

'Not been drinking at all, I suppose?'

'No, I have not, sir.'

'Of course not!' sneered the other. 'Every drunken beast is safe to say that.'

'Do you mean to say'— began Stephen furiously; then he checked himself abruptly. 'I never told a lie yet, and I tell you I am as sober as you are.'

'None of your insolence, Ashton,'— began Charles.

'And what is more,' Stephen went on, 'if you thought I was not, you would not dare to say that to me.'

'Mind what you say,' the other was beginning again; but Stephen, who was afraid he would see his companion, and was still more afraid of what he might be led on to say, dragged Jack away.

They reached the farm in due time, and the door was opened by Annie at Stephen's tap, and almost without a word he carried Jack upstairs and laid him on his bed, and, slipping noiselessly out of the house, once more took his way home.

CHAPTER III

THE DRAGON

IT often seems as if on some particular day things were fated to go wrong—as if every possible worry and annoyance had conspired to lay special siege to our patience and temper. Perhaps the cause of this may be in ourselves, and that it is because our own state of mind is not so good-tempered and cheerful as usual, that we are ready to believe that everyone and everything is against us. This might have been the reason that, from beginning to end, the next day was an unlucky one for Stephen Ashton.

It was a little after his usual time when he woke, and he was therefore obliged to hurry over his preparations for his solitary breakfast. And because he was a little late, the fire absolutely refused to burn. Everyone knows how perverse a fire can be on an occasion, and no fire could have behaved worse than this. No sooner had Stephen, by a careful

arrangement of sticks and small pieces of coal, built it up with a view to a perfect system of ventilation, than the largest piece must needs tilt itself sideways, and the whole artfully-constructed fabric collapsed into a black and dismal ruin. The kettle, too, instead of singing cheerfully, as a well-behaved kettle should do, refused to utter a sound or make the least attempt to boil, till Stephen had wasted nearly a box of matches, and sacrificed a large portion of the supply of wood intended to last him for the week.

All this had made him still later, and he was obliged to hurry off to the factory before he had well finished his meal, and then was still further hindered by finding that the neighbour who usually kept his key and tidied his house and prepared his dinner was out, and the cottage left in charge of a solemn child of four, who was with great difficulty made to understand that he had put the key on the mantel-piece.

Stephen rushed off to the factory, arriving hot and breathless at the door just as the last man was going in. After all these small worries it seemed a special piece of ill-luck that Smith, who worked next to him, whom *he* disliked, and who with good reason disliked *him*, should find all his materials in the utmost disorder, and should accuse Stephen of being the cause of it. Stephen denied it, and asserted that he had finished his work before Smith on the Saturday, and had left the room before him.

'Besides, my things are just as bad,' he remarked. 'Look here! Everything is topsy-turvy; it will take me a good half-hour before I can begin to work. Paddy, you good-for-nothing fellow, have you been having an Irish haymaking here? If you have, just you wait till you go out to dinner, and I'll show you a thing or two!'

'Faith, it wasn't I,' replied the other, with an exaggerated look of alarm. 'I'd not meddle with anything of yours for all the wealth o' my forefathers. By the same token, all the good folks had might have been held in a pint pot without any bottom to it at all at all!'

'Then I suppose you *did* do it, O'Brien,' said Stephen, laughing. 'If you wouldn't have done it for all their wealth, and they had none, I suppose you did it for nothing, which is what they had!'

'Now, what a cliver fellow!' said the Irishman, with a pretended look of intense admiration. 'Hark to him, me boys; he's talking as learnedly as if he were Brian Boru himself!'

'Oh, shut up, do!' said Stephen. 'You're wasting all my time, and I haven't a minute to spare. Get along to your own work!'

He gave O'Brien a good-humoured push as he spoke, and the other pretended to stagger backward, and unluckily came into collision with Smith, upsetting all the tools he had just got right, and scattering them in worse confusion than ever.

'What are you about, fooling like this?' he exclaimed angrily. 'Really, Ashton, you're a perfect nuisance; it would be a good thing if something would happen to make the master give you the sack. I shall take good care he knows what makes me behind-hand this morning. Leave those things alone, will you?' as Stephen began putting his things straight. 'I don't want any more mischief done.'

'Sure, I'll pick 'em up,' interposed O'Brien, seeing that Stephen was about to retort angrily. 'This is the boy that did the deed, and this is the boy that will put it to rights. There's nothing to make such a dust about, mate.'

'I'm no mate of yours,' growled Smith; 'you and that lumbering lout of a fellow over there can pair together, if you like; but if you or he play this sort of game again, there'll be a row, I can tell you.'

'You may as well be civil, Smith!' said Stephen, rather indignantly. 'If you don't want Paddy to help, you might as well say so civilly. I told you just now that I went away before you on Saturday and know nothing about it.'

'Of course not,' returned Smith, 'you never do anything wrong; we all know that. What would the parson think if he'd seen you where I did on Saturday evening?'

'He'd have seen *you* there too, me boy,' interposed O'Brien, with a chuckle; 'so perhaps 'twould be as well to hould yer tongue!'

A laugh from the others at this remark did not tend to improve Smith's temper.

'None of your sauce,' he said angrily. 'If you think I'm going to be insulted by an Irish beggar'—

'Who's insulting now?' interrupted Stephen indignantly. 'O'Brien is no more a beggar than any of the rest of us, and there's many a civil fellow that's not an Englishman, just as there's many an uncivil fellow that is.'

'Do you mean me by that?' Smith flared up.

'If the cap fits, wear it,' rejoined Stephen coolly.

After which a 'row royal' began, all the men near taking part in it, and most of them siding with Smith; some because Stephen's temper had made him unpopular with his comrades, and some for the mere amusement of seeing 'Ashton getting into a wax.'

Meanwhile O'Brien sat on a bench, swinging his legs and enjoying himself vastly, occasionally putting in a word on behalf of Stephen, of whom he was in reality very fond, and for whose strength he entertained a profound and respectful admiration. In the midst of the hubbub, before the men had time to make any pretence of being at work, young Mr. Spencer suddenly appeared at the door of the room.

'What's all this about?' he inquired. 'Ah!' as the men hastily dispersed, leaving Smith and Ashton confronting him, still looking angrily at each other, 'I might have been sure it was Ashton. Whenever

there is a quarrel going on, it is sure to be Ashton who begins it.'

'Or, at any rate, *you* will say it is, sir,' said Stephen, too angry to remember to whom he was speaking.

'Don't be impertinent, Ashton,' Charles Spencer interrupted, all the more hastily that he felt the accusation to be true. 'You can't deny that you are quarrelling now, I suppose.'

'I deny that I began it, sir.'

'No doubt — as you denied something else last night. There is probably as much truth in one as in the other'—

'And there's as much truth in your accusation now as there was then!' exclaimed Stephen furiously. 'Not that you care for that, as long as you can find fault with me.'

'That's enough, Ashton. I told you the other day that I would not put up with your insolence any more, and'—

'Indeed, sir,' interrupted O'Brien, unable to keep quiet any longer, 'Ashton didn't want to quarrel at all. Smith, there, was in a tantivy over his tools, that some of the boys had been messing about, and then it's I that had bad luck to tread on his toes and upset the apple-cart—sorrow be to me for a great stoopid spalpeen! The others know all about it, if they'd only the sinse to spake.'

'Perhaps it is as well they don't speak,' said Charles Spencer with a sneer. 'It's sometimes better

for a man that people should not say all they know about him.'

'Yes, sir,' Stephen said, in a voice that sounded like a suppressed roar. 'That applies to others a great deal more than to me. It *is* sometimes as well that a man does not say all he knows of another. It is perhaps just as well that *I* don't.'

Williams, who was loitering near, on the chance of pacifying Stephen, or of interfering on his behalf, was astonished to see that, for some unknown reason, this speech contained a shaft that had gone home. Charles Spencer's face was deadly pale, whether from rage or any other cause, it was impossible to say. For an instant the two men faced one another, and then Charles recovered himself with an effort.

'There's been enough time wasted over this nonsense,' he said. 'Go on with your work, Smith, and don't let me hear of any more quarrelling; I won't allow it here. Ashton, if you choose to apologise before night for your impertinence to me, I will overlook it, as you seem to have been provoked; but I am not going to be always threatening you with dismissal—the next time it happens, you will go.'

The Irishman, with the quickness of his nation, noticed that Mr. Spencer avoided looking at Ashton as he spoke, and went hastily across the room and out at the farthest door, without giving him an opportunity of saying any more.

'Faith, now, the boy has given him a rap on the

knuckles, I'm after supposing!' he muttered, as he turned away to go to his work, thinking the matter was well over.

But, unfortunately, Stephen's temper had been too much roused to subside in a moment; and as the door closed he exclaimed angrily—

'Threaten me, indeed! he had better mind that I don't do *more* than threaten him. He had better take care of himself, for I'll not stand any more of it. If he bullies me again, I'll pay him out, as sure as my name is Ashton, even if I do get'—

'Nonsense, lad,' said Williams, interrupting him hastily. 'You know you had no business to speak like that. You wouldn't have said it if you hadn't been in a temper, and you ought to tell him so. You will, too, if you're the lad I take you to be.'

'Not I,' muttered Stephen; but his tone was not very decided, and Williams knew that, having had his fling, he was rapidly cooling down.

But words spoken unadvisedly are apt to recoil upon the speaker when least he expects them, and it often happens, as is said of other bad things, that hasty speeches, like chickens, come home to roost. And so it was that, before many hours had passed, Stephen would have given much to have recalled the words which, in the momentary lull following Charles Spencer's departure, were distinctly heard by all the men near him. As usual with him, however, he soon recovered his temper, and for the rest of the day

worked with the utmost diligence and good temper, lending a hand wherever he was wanted, and even going out of his way to find something that Smith had mislaid, which piece of civility the latter received with an unamiable grunt by way of thanks. He spent the evening in his favourite fields, and as he was returning to his cottage heard himself called by a lad named Davis.

'Ashton! here a minute.'

'Well, what's up?' returned Stephen, pausing rather unwillingly, for the other was standing at the door of the Three Bells, and he had a great dislike to that place, which had a bad name in the town.

'Some of us fellows want to make a party to go out to Elton next Saturday—drive over, get a bit of cricket, and back. You come along, and we'll give them a jolly good licking.'

'Who is going?' asked Stephen, rather dubiously, though the cricket was a great attraction.

'Harris and Barnes, and'— naming several others, some of a rather doubtful reputation.

'Well, I don't know; I'll see about it. You had better not depend on me; at all events, if I do, I'll walk back when the cricket is over—for you'll be too noisy a set for me by that time,' he added mentally.

'You may as well come,' remarked one of the other men standing by. 'When you do hit a ball, it goes with a vengeance.'

Stephen laughed, and nodding to Davis, was going

on, when Smith, who had just come out of the house, stopped him.

'Where are you off to?' he remarked, in rather a loud voice. 'Not going yet, surely? You're not always in such a hurry to get away and leave good company. Much better stay here for a bit.'

Stephen looked at him, wondering what he meant, for never in his life had he entered the door of the Three Bells. But before he could reply, he saw one or two of the men touch their hats, and turning sharply round came almost into collision with Charles Spencer, who was coming rather hastily up the road. Many a time afterwards—by day, weary and sick at heart in his utter solitude and despair; at night, when in the dead silence round him he seemed almost to hear the voices of his old companions, as he recalled every word of that memorable evening—did Stephen wonder whether Smith had seen from the window the young master coming and deliberately set that trap for him. Had he deliberately stopped him till Mr. Spencer came up, that he might see him at the door of a public, and intended by his words to imply that he had just come out, and that it was his usual custom to be drinking there?

With a muttered apology he touched his hat and moved on one side; but Charles, who was evidently in a state of excitement and irritation, glanced from him to the door of the house in a meaning manner, and said ironically—

'This time facts are facts, Ashton, and even you can't deny them.'

The bystanders expected an outbreak, but, though Stephen seemed about to speak, he checked himself and stood watching Charles down the street in silence, as if thinking of something else. But as he disappeared through a gate that led into some rather unfrequented fields, Stephen gave himself a shake, and muttering something which the others did not catch, he set off in the same direction. The other men remained laughing and talking about the door, gradually dispersing, some going inside and some going home, till only Smith and Davis, who was watching for a friend to settle about the cricket expedition, remained outside.

'Why, hulloa! here's Ashton coming back in a hurry,' remarked Davis, about twenty minutes later. 'What have you been up to, old fellow? You look rather upset.'

'Been up to? Nothing particular,' returned Stephen hurriedly. 'I meant to go up to the Springs, but it's too late now.'

'Why, what on earth have you been doing to yourself?' said Smith. 'Just look at your shirt, man; it's soaking wet. Whew!' with a whistle of astonishment, as Stephen came within the light from the door, 'have you been having a fight?'

'A fight!' repeated Stephen, somewhat confusedly, hastily buttoning his coat. 'I've scratched myself somehow, I believe.'

'A good deep scratch, I should think,' said Smith significantly.

'Well, I'll let you know about Saturday, Davis,' Stephen called to him as he was going into the house. 'Why, there's ten o'clock striking; how slow my watch is! I had no idea it was so late. It's lucky I heard it strike, or I should have been in a pretty fix in the morning. Good-night, Smith.'

He walked off as he spoke, and turned down the lane to his cottage.

'Now what has Mr. Stephen been after?' soliloquised Smith, looking after him. 'Scratched himself, indeed! It would take a good deal more than a scratch to make him in that state. I expect he has been putting his foot into it this time, and a good thing too. I shall be uncommon glad if he has got into a mess; it will serve him right for meddling with me.'

And with this charitable reflection Smith turned contentedly into the Three Bells, and spent some time longer in muddling his brains, with a few like-minded associates.

CHAPTER IV

VICTOR OR VANQUISHED?

THE little town of Arlingham found itself the next morning in a state of excitement that was quite unusual to it. It was not very often its placid life was stirred by anything outside the usual small incidents of commonplace, every-day routine, but this time something really had happened. Almost as soon as the inhabitants were astir, a report was passed from one to another, increasing as it went, first that young Mr. Spencer had met with an accident, then that he had been killed, finally that he had been murdered.

As the morning passed on, these rumours gradually dwindled down to something approaching the actual facts, and at last it became known that some workmen coming across the fields from the railway in the middle of the night, had seen someone lying under the hedge, a few yards from the path. Upon going close to investigate, they had found Mr. Charles Spencer in an

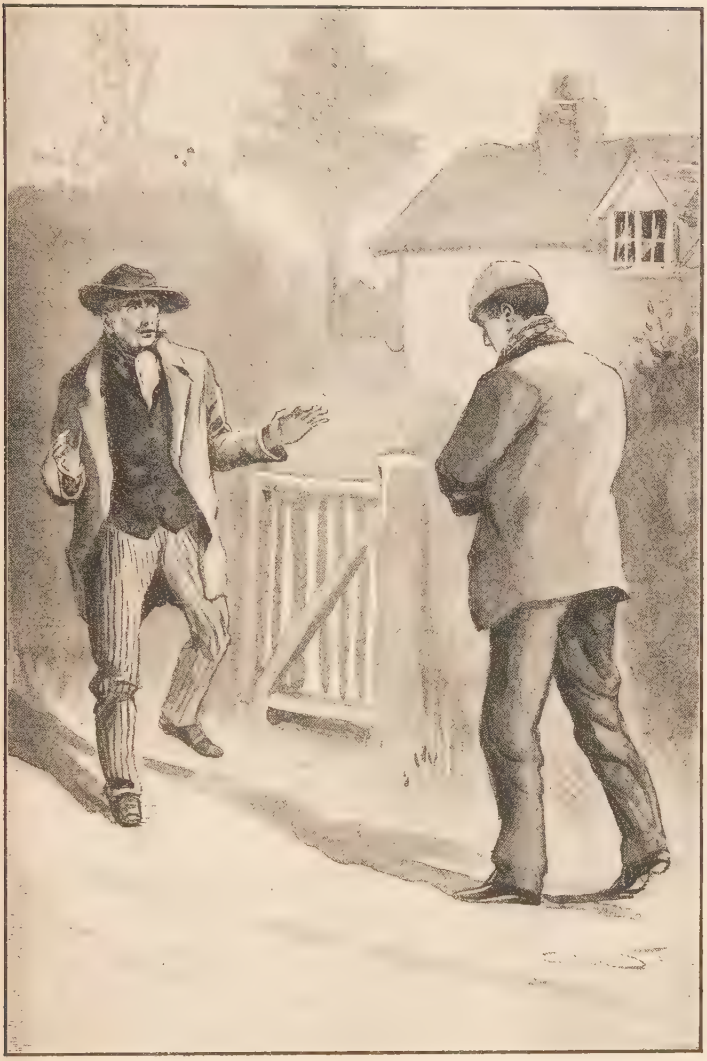
unconscious state, having been apparently for some time in that condition. As they saw that he had sustained severe injuries to his head, they sent one of their party to fetch a policeman, who pronounced it to be an awkward business, and had him carefully conveyed home.

It was soon known that the injuries could not have been caused by any accident, and before many hours were over the angry words that had passed between Stephen Ashton and his employer had been repeated so often, that a vague suspicion became in many minds an absolute certainty. Almost the last person to hear of anything wrong was Stephen himself, and though he noticed that people looked curiously at him as he went home to dinner, he never for one moment connected it with the report he had heard in the factory, that young Mr. Spencer had met with an accident. Nor would he have had the slightest idea what was coming upon him, if he had not heard himself called just as he reached his house. Turning round, to his amazement he saw O'Brien waving his arms wildly, as he hurried after him.

'What is it, Paddy?' Stephen asked, as he paused before opening the door. 'You'll have no breath to cool *your* porridge at this rate.'

'Don't go in, man!' panted the breathless Irishman. 'They may be there now, the spalpeens, for all I know.'

'Who? Where? What's up, old fellow?'



'The police—bad luck to them! Don't you know,' seeing Ashton looked still more puzzled, 'they're saying that Mr. Spencer was'—lowering his voice—'murdered!'

'*Murdered*?' repeated Stephen, 'why, he's alive, man, isn't he?'

'They say he won't live till night,' went on the other hurriedly, 'and some of the men are after saying they heard you threaten him, and that your shirt—get in, quick, if they're not here, and burn that shirt of yours, and cut off till it's blown over, if'—

He stopped abruptly, for Stephen laid his hand heavily on his shoulder and said hoarsely—

'You believe that, O'Brien?'

'Not I,' returned the other, with a quick glance of his merry blue eyes, now full of sympathy. 'I said to the boys, says I, "Ashton might have given him a crack o' the pate—and where's he to blame if a fellow has got a skull like an egg-shell?—but he's not the man to have left him there, if he had done it. He may be full of his pranks and a quare fish to tackle when his blood's up, but he's not that sort of a chap, and I stands by him as he didn't do it," says I.'

'Thank you, old fellow,' said Stephen, wringing the other's hand. 'I'll never forget that, or your coming to warn me either. The others are ready enough to believe it, no doubt,' he continued bitterly.

'They had better not tell me so,' said the warm-hearted Irishman impulsively. 'I'll crack a few of

their empty pates for 'em, and that will give them something else to gabble about.'

Stephen was silent, and looked round at his little garden and up at the blue sky overhead. The sun shone brightly, the flowers he had tended with so much care looked as gay as ever, why was it that a sudden feeling of despair and misery seemed to come over him? Was it a presentiment of coming misfortune?

'See there!' suddenly exclaimed O'Brien, looking up the lane, 'if I don't believe I saw that long-legged boy Thomas spying round the corner. He'll be here before you've got rid of that shirt. Quick, man, quick! and I'll stand by you. Give me a poker or a bit o' a stick, and I'll keep him from poking his ugly nose where he isn't wanted, bad luck to him!'

The excitable Irishman looked so delighted at the prospect of a 'row,' that, upset as he was, Stephen could not help laughing at him.

'I think the two of us would be a match for a goodish few, Paddy, and I'd like no one better than you to stand by me in a scrimmage. But it wouldn't do me any good to get you into a scrape, though it's worth much to have found a mate that will stick to one in any trouble. I had nothing to do with it, and I don't think they can possibly fix it on me. Be off, O'Brien, and get your dinner; I shall never forget what a good fellow you are.'

Rather disappointed at losing the chance of a few hard knocks, the Irishman repeated his offer of help

and belief that his friend had not done it, and, wishing him well out of it, went slowly and regretfully up the lane. Stephen watched him out of sight, and then involuntarily glanced up towards the street. But no one was visible, and he went into the house and closed the door. Almost mechanically he took his dinner from the shelf where his neighbour always placed it, put it on the table, and sat down. But for some minutes it remained untasted, while the terrible thought rushed into his mind that his passionate temper had at last brought a punishment on him.

What wonder if people suspected him of this, when everyone knew that his violent outbreaks had often led to what might have caused bad accidents, if nothing worse! As he remembered the many quarrels he was known to have had with his employer,—the threats so hastily uttered only the previous morning, the fact that he had been seen to follow Mr. Spencer into the very field where he had been found,—he did not wonder that suspicion had fastened itself on him. He knew only too well, and his heart sank within him at the thought, that the only explanation he could give of the blood-stains on his shirt would be worse than useless. Only Mr. Spencer himself could prove his innocence, and suppose he died without saying anything? Even if he recovered, Stephen knew well that he would have to disclose a carefully-kept secret to explain what had happened. Would he do so to clear the man who had been so repeatedly

insolent to him and who had, by his passionate temper, provoked so great a dislike?

Stephen tried to turn his mind from this idea and to proceed with his meal, but after eating a few mouthfuls he pushed it away and going to the window, stood looking moodily out, without seeing anything.

'Ashton!'

Stephen started and looked round. The newcomer closed the door as noiselessly as he had opened it, and advanced into the room.

'Well?' was all Stephen could bring himself to say.

'I see you have heard something,' the other went on, in a tone of evident relief, 'and know what I've come about.'

'I know what my kind mates are saying, if that's what you mean,' said Stephen indignantly. 'They are all ready enough to say an ill word for me. I saw Mr. Charles last evening, I'll not deny that, but he was all right when I left him, and— Jackson!' stepping forward suddenly and seizing the other's arms in a grasp like a vice, 'you don't really mean to arrest me?'

'I am sorry enough, Ashton, but you know I can't help it,' the policeman said, not making the slightest effort to free himself. 'Don't make any resistance; it only makes matters worse, and cannot do any good.'

'There are a dozen more of you within call, no doubt,' said Stephen passionately. 'If you have made

up your minds that I murdered one man, I suppose you think I shouldn't hesitate at another.'

'No, I am quite alone,' Jackson said quietly. 'We have been friends all our lives, Stephen, and I would far rather not have come, as you know very well. But I own I *was* afraid you might lose your temper and do something you would be sorry for afterwards, and which would make it worse for you; and as it had to be done, I thought you would be less likely to fly out at me than at some of the others. You'll be sensible and come quietly, won't you, lad?'

'Yes, of course, Harry,' said Stephen, calming at once and releasing his hold. 'I know no more of it than you do. Mr. Charles and I had a row in the morning, and he said if I didn't apologise before night I should go; and so I went after him then to'—

'Don't say anything you would rather not have repeated,' interrupted the policeman warningly.

'I've got nothing to conceal,' Stephen said proudly. 'Do you think if I had done it I should have gone to my work as if nothing had happened?'

The other made no reply.

'Where are the clothes you had on last night, Ashton?' he asked, after a short pause.

'Upstairs,' was the answer.

'Come up and show them to me.'

Stephen went slowly up the stairs, beginning to feel as if he were in a bad dream, and stood silently by, while Jackson carefully examined his clothes, and

looking round the room, picked up the unlucky shirt, which Stephen had thrown carelessly into a corner.

'I could explain how it got into that state,' he said, as Jackson looked at him interrogatively, 'but no one would believe me if I did. I should like to know what made you pitch upon me?'

'We found a knife with your initials on it under Mr. Spencer'— Jackson was beginning, when Stephen interrupted him, with a cry of dismay.

'My knife? why, I lent it to'—

A dead silence. A bee entangled in a web in the window beat frantically against the pane in its efforts to get free, and Stephen fixed his eyes on it, as if he saw in it a type of his future fate. Would it beat out its life in captivity, or would it break through the net its wily foe had made for it? A minute—or was it an hour?—passed, and the bee shook off its toils—damaged a little, perhaps a little hurt; its wings soiled and torn, but free — free to wing its way slowly in the bright sunshine, and to taste once more of the sweet flowers in the garden below.

Free! and he was bound. Round him the web was closing, and closing tighter and tighter every moment. Would it be so with him? Would he break through the web, damaged perhaps by that terrible blast of suspicion always hanging like a cloud over him, or—

The policeman watched him attentively, not betraying by the slightest movement the intense interest he felt, the longing he had that his old friend would say

something to explain what he knew were terribly suspicious circumstances, would give him some clue to enable him to look elsewhere for the culprit.

'My knife?' Stephen said, turning towards him at last, as if there had been no pause in the conversation.

'Yes. Mr. Charles had a bad cut in the wrist, as well as the blows on his head, and he was clutching tight in his hand a handkerchief with—your name in the corner.'

Stephen made no remark; he sat down on the bed, buried his face in his hands, and again there was a silence.

'Harry,' he said, looking up at the other as he stood beside him, 'there will be many ready to throw a stone at me. I deserve it, for the many times I've let fly at them; but I have not done this. You have known me all my life—in spite of what you have seen, do *you* believe, even if I had knocked him down in a rage, I should have left him to—die, in cold blood?'

Jackson said nothing; it was not his business to give an opinion one way or the other. But he put both his hands on Stephen's shoulders, and looked straight down into the dark eyes that were raised to his.

'Thank you, Harry,' said poor Stephen, in a choked voice.

'Come along now,' the policeman said, moving to the door; and without a word Stephen followed him.

He paused in the room below and took up a photo-

graph of Annie Morris that stood on the table and put it into a drawer.

'Harry,' he said, 'will you do me a kindness? Go up to Ash Tree Farm and break it to Annie, or, if you can't go yourself, ask Williams or O'Brien to go.'

'I'll go myself at four o'clock.'

'There's no need to send her any message,' went on Stephen quietly. 'Give her my love, and tell her not to fret. That's all.'

He closed the drawer, took up his hat, and went out.

'We'll go round the lane,' remarked Jackson, as he locked the door and put the key into his pocket. 'There will be fewer people that way.'

And so the good folks in the main street, who had been deeply interested in seeing Jackson turn up the lane, and were assembling at the doors speculating upon the result, were disappointed of the sight of Stephen Ashton in custody.

CHAPTER V

TRIED IN THE FIRE

IT seems a strange thing that people should be, as a rule, much more inclined to believe the worst of their fellow-men than the best; should be far more likely to try to prove them guilty than innocent; should feel a far greater satisfaction in saying, 'I'm sure he did it,' than 'I hope he did not.' Perhaps the comfortable feeling that we should not have done it ourselves, and therefore if he did, everyone must see how far superior we are, lies at the bottom of the rather uncharitable propensity.

Anyhow, so it is. And so the majority of the people of Arlingham pronounced Stephen Ashton guilty, and shaking their heads wisely, gave it as their opinion that no one could be surprised at such a temper leading to a bad end. Everyone had some story or other to tell of him. Smith lost no opportunity of asserting that Stephen had meant to throw him out

of window, and might have murdered him. Most of the factory men had some story to tell of Stephen's violent outbreaks (omitting altogether their own share in the provocation that led to them), and some raked up forgotten tales of boyish passion, notably one case in which Stephen, furious at an accusation of cheating, had thrown a cricket ball at a boy's head and stunned him. It was in vain that the victim of that escapade, a constant chum of Stephen and one of his most staunch defenders, declared that he had richly deserved it, and that boys' quarrels were soon over and meant nothing. There was no denying that it might have ended very differently.

'There was young Hill,' others would say; 'Ashton nearly drowned him.' And they forgot to add to the story that, though Stephen had carried young Hill, a blustering bully of a lad, to the river and thrown him in, he had instantly jumped in after him, and had denied himself every pleasure till he had saved up enough money to replace the worthless watch and chain, which had disappeared in the mud at the bottom of the river, by one which was pronounced by the owner's envious comrades to be 'well worth a dozen duckings,' nor did Hill ever mention the taunts and sneers that had led to his immersion.

Moreover, a good deal of sympathy was felt with old Mr. Spencer, who had been for some time in failing health, and obliged to leave most of the business to his son. Charles Spencer, too, though not credited

with any specially kind heart, and not very popular with his men, yet had the character of being a just and fair employer, and was not known to have any particular enemy.

In the absence of any other clue, circumstantial evidence certainly bore heavily on poor Stephen; nor was it lightened by his own account of what had happened that evening.

For the story he told was so improbable, that even his friends did not wonder that those who did not know him shrugged their shoulders and looked incredulous. He owned that he had followed Mr. Charles into the field, but only with the intention of apologising for his rudeness in the morning. When he overtook him, Mr. Charles had, to his astonishment, turned angrily upon him, accused him of spying upon him and dogging his footsteps, and declared he would make him pay for it. As he saw that he was much excited, and that it was useless to try to explain matters, he was turning back, when Mr. Charles suddenly stumbled and fell against him, and, evidently under the impression that he had struck him, had aimed a tremendous blow at him with some sharp weapon, some kind of knife or tool, as far as he could see, which he seemed to have been holding in his hand. To save himself, he had caught him by the arms, and in the struggle that followed Mr. Spencer had cut his wrist badly. This had instantly calmed him, and, far from doing him any injury, he had bound

his own handkerchief round the cut to stop the bleeding, and after a few more words they had parted, he quickly retracing his steps, and Mr. Charles going on into the next field. Being questioned as to what had passed between them, he resolutely refused to answer, stating that it referred entirely to some private affairs of Mr. Spencer, and that he should say nothing about it. He had no doubt that the blood on his shirt had been caused by the wound, but he had not noticed it till his attention had been called to it by Smith.

As regarded his knife, he remained absolutely silent; not even Mr. Bevan could persuade him to say to whom he had lent it.

'I don't want to get anyone else into a scrape, sir,' he replied, when Mr. Bevan, who fully believed in his innocence, urged him to throw a light on that point at least. 'If it were only that, I might tell; but if they don't believe my story it would do no good, and only bring trouble on someone else. I don't believe *he* did it either, and it passes my comprehension how it got there. If Mr. Charles comes to his senses again, he may be able to say who hit him.'

But days went on, and Charles Spencer remained unconscious, hovering between life and death; and to Stephen, well-nigh worn out with the agony of suspense, it seemed as if each day was longer than the last. At length one evening, when nearly a

fortnight had elapsed, Charles, who had been lying motionless for hours, began muttering incoherently, and tried to raise himself. The doctor was standing by the bed; and laid his hand on his arm to quiet him, and Charles half opened his eyes.

'Don't, Ashton, don't!' he said, in a hoarse voice. 'Let go! let go! Ah—Ashton!' his voice died away in confused murmurs, and again he relapsed into unconsciousness.

But he had said enough to decide poor Stephen's fate, had anything been wanting to do so; and no one was surprised to hear that he had been committed for trial.

At first Stephen kept up bravely, maintaining that he was innocent, and the truth would be sure to come out; but as days went on and no further discoveries were made, he became more and more depressed, and scarcely cared to rouse himself even to speak to Mr. Bevan. The only thing that cheered him were the messages sent him by Annie Morris, who unhesitatingly avowed her trust in him and her undying affection.

'But she must not have anything more to do with me, sir,' he said to Mr. Bevan, the day before the trial. 'I told her long ago I was not good enough for her, and now this must be the end of it. I have no right to complain, for I brought it all on myself. If I had not been in such a rage with Mr. Charles in the morning, I should not have gone after him into that field. If it were not for the trouble I have brought upon her, I almost think I'—

'What is it, my poor boy?' said Mr. Bevan, as Stephen stopped and covered his face with his hands.

'You will think me quite out of my mind, sir, but sometimes I feel as if this was rather a good thing. I don't know how to say it, but I have felt so afraid, especially lately, that I *might* do something bad, that I am almost glad to be punished for what I didn't do. And I am trying hard to feel that, whatever happens to me, it will be all for the best.'

Did he realise what was probably before him? Mr. Bevan wondered, as he left him, sad at heart at the trouble that had come upon the young man in whom he took so much interest and for whom he felt so much affection. Not the worst—not that which Mr. Bevan could not contemplate without a shudder of horror; which he had strenuously refused to believe was even possible. For Charles Spencer was recovering, very slowly and with many relapses, but still, gradually getting better. It would be years, so the doctors said, before he got over it—indeed, some doubts were expressed whether he would ever be quite the same again; but, as far as they could judge, his life was in no danger. And, though evidently weak and suffering, he was able to appear at the trial. Stephen, who had braced himself up to endure whatever might be in store for him, could not conceal his anxiety when Mr. Spencer appeared, or his eagerness to hear his first words. But, somewhat to the surprise of the crowded court, his evidence proved to be very little worth

hearing. Those who had formed their own conclusions as to Stephen's guilt were dissatisfied at not having them confirmed, while Mr. Bevan and the few who fully believed in his innocence were bitterly disappointed that Charles Spencer could not or would not entirely clear him. For, summed up shortly, all he said was that he remembered very little about anything that had happened that evening. He had been standing at the corner of the field when Ashton came suddenly up behind him. He could not remember what he had said, but was certainly under the impression that Ashton had pushed against him, and, knowing his violent temper, and that he had been insolent to him in the morning, he had thought he intended to strike him, and he believed some kind of a struggle did take place. His memory had been affected by the injuries he had received, and he scarcely knew what had occurred. He believed Ashton had left him, but whether he had gone away altogether he did not know. Two gentlemen had come along the road and spoken to him, and he thought it must have been immediately afterwards that he felt a violent blow on the head, and he recollected nothing more. He had seen no one after he saw Ashton, except the two gentlemen mentioned, nor, as far as he knew, was anyone else in sight. He had intended walking to a friend's house, but, of course, had not done so.

In vain Stephen's counsel tried to get from him

any more definite account of what Stephen had said when they first met, or how long a time had elapsed between the meeting and the blow. He only reiterated that everything was in a confusion in his mind, and that it was impossible for him to say any more. His purse and watch were still in his pocket.

Was it the truth or not? or was it, as Mr. Bevan and some others shrewdly suspected, not the whole truth? None could say, and, in face of the medical evidence that the injuries might possibly have had the effect of causing a confused idea of what had happened previously, there was nothing to be done but to accept Mr. Spencer's own account of his failure of memory, and not press him any further.

One fact gave a momentary glimmer of hope to Stephen and his friends. One of the two gentlemen, both well known in the neighbourhood and of unimpeachable veracity, gave evidence that he and his friend had been walking home along the road, and had seen Charles Spencer leaning against the gate into the field, apparently waiting for someone. They had wished him 'good-night,' and he had replied. They had just been having a discussion as to the time, his watch being rather before ten and his friend's five minutes after. As they passed Mr. Spencer, he had called out to him, to ask whether the Arlingham clock had struck, and Mr. Spencer had called back that it had not, and just at that

moment it struck. They stopped at a stile a few steps farther on, looking at his house through the trees, and then went slowly up the road, and as they turned the corner they saw Mr. Spencer move away from the gate and go down the path. It must have been quite ten minutes past the hour when they last saw him.

This was corroborated by the friend, who added that he had made the remark that Spencer looked put out about something. They had noticed that he was holding a handkerchief in his hand.

Stephen had stated that he was talking to Smith at the door of the Three Bells when the clock struck ten, and that Smith and Davis had noticed the stains on his shirt. If Charles had been seen after this, it was obvious they were in no way connected with the injuries, and Stephen was able to prove that he had gone straight home afterwards.

Davis agreed about the conversation, but was unable to fix the exact time, as he had taken no notice, and had gone into the house without giving the matter a thought.

Smith, when questioned, asserted that it might have been before or after ten—he could not say. He did not recollect Ashton saying the clock was striking. It might have been five or ten minutes past, or it might have been before—he had taken no notice of the time. Ashton was very much put out

at his seeing the blood on his shirt. Though he gave his evidence in a surly manner, that did not prepossess either judge or jury in his favour, still it threw a doubt on Stephen's positive statement that he had called his attention to the time.

Several witnesses spoke of Stephen's perpetual quarrels with Mr. Charles; of his angry threats in the morning, and of his notoriously passionate disposition. After this, matters were soon settled. The jury had already made up their minds, and required no time for deliberation. The judge—perhaps unconsciously influenced by the contrast between the victim, weak and injured, mentally and bodily, and the tall, powerful prisoner, well known to be possessed of unusual strength—after dilating at great length upon the unprovoked and murderous attack, and the necessity of protecting an employer against the violence of his workmen, sentenced the prisoner to six years' penal servitude.

Poor Stephen started violently on hearing a sentence which was considerably more than he had expected, even if his worst fears were fulfilled; but, beyond a sudden shiver, he showed no sign of emotion.

The deeply-interested and all-knowing public, indeed, remarked to one another that he did not appear to care a straw about it. They might have thought differently, had they known that no sooner had he left the dock, than the unfortunate Stephen

reeled against the attendant warder in a dead faint.

'Don't—don't!' he said to Jackson, who tried to utter some words of friendship and comfort, when he came to himself. 'The kindest thing you can do is not to speak to me. It would have been better now if Mr. Spencer had done for me.'

But he roused himself to send a message to Jack Morris, asking him to keep steady now, and be a comfort and help to Annie; and he could say no more.

And so, after some comments, the world went on its way, as it will do, whatever happens to any particular unit among its millions of inhabitants. Charles Spencer recovered sufficiently to superintend the business, though he continued so unwell that he was obliged to employ a foreman to take most of the work off his hands. There were some who remarked that he was gloomy and irritable to an unusual degree, but that was no doubt to be expected after such severe injuries, and in his bad state of health. Smith went on his way prosperously, only frequenting the Three Bells more constantly than of old. Annie Morris lived on her quiet life, and if she shed tears in secret, at least her father and Jack found her ever quiet and helpful, trying to forget her own sorrow in her care for them, and waiting in loving trust for happier days.

So, the excitement over, the matter was soon

forgotten, and few gave a thought to the lonely cell where, night after night, one quiet, patient man paused in the old familiar prayer, till he could honestly feel in heart what he could so easily repeat with his lips—'Forgive us our trespasses — *as we forgive them.*'

CHAPTER VI

ALONE

A BLEAK November evening, about five years later, and Stephen Ashton stood once more looking down into his favourite little stream. But changed indeed was everything since that summer evening, all those weary years before, when he and Annie Morris had sat on its banks in that pleasant meadow. How well he remembered it! Many a time he had recalled every word of that conversation, and thought over Mr. Bevan's words, as a help to bear his trouble patiently and in a proper spirit.

He had come back to his old home—why, he could hardly have told, save that it *was* his home, and that he had an intense wish to see it again. He had come back longing to see the old faces, to hear the old friendly voices, and he found himself—alone! He had forgotten that the wearisome time, in which his only solace had been to recall to his mind the faces

of his former companions, had not altered their opinion of him—that he was in their opinion now, as he was then, a passionate, ill-tempered firebrand, a would-be murderer—a convict! He had not even given a thought to their probable treatment of him, or supposed for a moment that the majority of them would avoid him, would despise him, would look upon him as quite outside their respectable friendship. He had not imagined—and though this was less painful to his feelings, it was now becoming a very serious matter to him—that no one would employ him. Other things, too, had changed. Old Farmer Morris was dead—dying peacefully with his good daughter tending him, and rendered happy in his last years by his son Jack, who for the last five years had worked steadily and quietly at the farm, and who had apparently repented of his wild ways, and had been the greatest comfort and help to Annie in her trouble. Stephen had heard of it from Mr. Bevan, who had occasionally visited him, and had thanked God for it.

But now Jack had gone. Ash Tree Farm belonged to little Sidney; and Jack, declaring that he wanted to see the world, had, soon after his father's death, set off to Australia, where he had a well-to-do uncle, with whom he was prospering greatly. Annie, left to herself, had resolved to go and live with an aunt, taking Sidney with her, and leaving the farm in the hands of a trustworthy bailiff, till Sidney should be old enough to undertake it himself. And though

Stephen knew that she had never wavered for an instant in her affection for him, he had always declared that she must not have anything more to do with him, and must consider herself perfectly free, if she felt the slightest wish to do so. Still, he knew she had intended to come to him as soon as he was released; but he had begged Mr. Bevan to tell her that he could not bear to see her at first, and to ask her not to try to see him, at least till the year was over.

One or two friends held stoutly to him. Williams greeted him with a quiet 'Glad to see you, lad,' and the warm-hearted Irishman spent many of his leisure hours trying to cheer him up. But this particular evening, things looked as gloomy as they well could do. Stephen's small stock of money had been eked out to the very utmost extent; and as he stood on the little bridge that crossed the stream where it flowed through the town, among other melancholy thoughts that troubled him, the one that was beginning to put itself most forward was how and when he should be able to get anything to eat.

It was a bitterly cold evening; the wind whistled and howled through the streets, and Stephen's thin coat was but small protection to him. He felt very lonely and miserable, and the dark, cold-looking water at his feet was as great a contrast to the rippling, merry stream higher up in the meadow, as were his feelings now to his thoughtless, boyish mood on that well-remembered evening.

His ever-kind friend the rector was away from home, and he sorely missed his cheering words and kind sympathy, and he had no one to whom he could apply for help, or even for the meal that he so greatly needed. He knew O'Brien would have gaily shared his earnings with him at the slightest hint that he was in need, but he shrank from letting anyone know the straits to which he was reduced, or of borrowing money which there was no prospect of his being able to repay.

'I suppose I must go away,' he muttered, as he leant against the parapet of the bridge. 'That is, if they will let me. I suppose they will. I would rather have stayed here quietly without getting any notice taken of me, but I can't help it. I don't know if I wouldn't rather starve—perhaps I shall come to that, wherever I am—perhaps I'm coming to it now; I feel rather queer.'

He shivered and moved away, but stumbled against the wall at the side of the bridge as the wind rushed round the corner, and remained leaning against it, as if not caring to move again.

'I don't want to go till I've seen Mr. Bevan again,' he continued, half aloud, 'if I can hold out. Starving is not a very pleasant thing, I find. It wouldn't take long to finish me up, I think. What's the matter with me, I wonder?'

'Ashton!'

Stephen started violently as a hand was laid on his

arm, and looked up with a bewildered air, but said nothing.

'What are you doing here?' the new-comer went on, stooping down and looking keenly at Stephen's pale, worn face and sad eyes. 'You have no business here at this time of night.'

Stephen looked round him in some surprise. It certainly was very dark. Had he been asleep or what? He had thought it was evening just now, and there was the clock striking—what was it?

'Ten o'clock, is it?' he said confusedly, putting his hand to his head. 'It's always striking ten, I think.'

'Ten? That's twelve, more likely. How long have you been lying here?'

More astonished still to find that he was lying on the ground, instead of, as he supposed, leaning against the wall, Stephen raised himself on his elbow and tried to get up.

'Here, let me help you,' said the other; and putting his hands under Stephen's arms, without any apparent effort, he lifted him to his feet. 'Now, if you can walk,' he continued, when he saw that Stephen had recovered sufficiently to stand, though still looking dazed and bewildered, 'you'll come along with me.'

Stephen made a few staggering steps forward, and then stopped.

'I've not had anything to drink, Jackson, if that's what you are thinking. I suppose I fainted, or something, but I'm sober enough; and you know

what will happen to me if you say anything against me.'

'Come along with me,' repeated Jackson peremptorily, observing how Stephen shivered as the wind met him. 'I'm not going to leave you here, so you will just do as I tell you.'

'It's very cruel of you, Harry!' Stephen said reproachfully. 'I did not expect it of you. I think you might let me go home, if I can get there.'

'If you can get there! but that's just it,' thought the policeman; but he did not waste more words, he merely took hold of Stephen's arm and made him move off the bridge. Poor Stephen gave a deep sigh that sounded more like a groan, and followed Jackson down the street, trying to walk steadily, though everything seemed misty and strange. He felt very tired and weak, and did not care much what became of him, so he did not think it worth while to remonstrate again. Presently Jackson stopped at a small house and opened the door with a latchkey.

'Go in, Stephen,' he said.

The fire was burning brightly, and a substantial supper was laid on the table.

'I've had a bit of extra work to-night,' Jackson went on, as Stephen stumbled into the room and sat down in the chair he pointed out, 'and I've just got to run down to the station, and then I'm off. I shall be back in a few minutes, but you have a good supper, lad, and don't wait for me.'

Before Stephen quite realised that his friend had no intention of getting him into trouble, the door shut and he was left to himself.

How cosy and warm the room was after the biting air outside; and how cheerful were the bright pictures, the shining plates on the dresser, the pretty ornaments on the mantelpiece! How very different from the miserable, bare room which was all he could get; and even that he did not see how he could keep beyond the week. It was years since he had been in such a comfortable room as this; and he almost forgot his famished condition as he looked round and examined everything with great interest.

Just such a home as this might have been his now, if it had not been for— Ah! for what? Partly, at least, for his own temper. And yet he had tried to get the better of it. Why had things gone so hard with him? Yes, conscience whispered, he had tried, but not with his whole heart—not as he would have done, could he have foreseen the trouble it would bring upon him. He had allowed himself to go on in a careless way, thinking that it did not matter much, and that some day he would break himself of it.

Well, he was pretty well broken of it now—as far as any outward sign of it went; and he trusted that inwardly, too, with God's grace, he might be a better man for this terrible discipline. With a deep sigh he drew his chair to the table, and feeling sure that 'good old Harry' meant to be taken at his word,

he set to work on his meal. Very much better he felt when he had finished it, and then, turning the chair to the fire, he sat dozing comfortably till Jackson reappeared.

'Been asleep, Stephen?' he said, well pleased to see by the other's looks that his idea had been a good one. 'I'll just get into my other coat and have some supper, and then I'll walk home with you. Come and have some more with me. I daresay you have not had as much as you could manage.'

'Yes, I have, thank you,' said Stephen gratefully. 'Harry, did you know that I had not had a morsel all day, and very little for the last week or two?'

Jackson nodded, with his mouth full.

'I guessed it, lad, and I knew I shouldn't get you here unless I made you come. I never meant to be unkind to you.'

'I know that,' said Stephen. 'I believe I should have died if you had not come that way. I don't know what is to become of me. I can get nothing to do, and I haven't a penny in the world. I'm rather sorry now that I came back here, but I didn't know where to go, and I daresay it would have been the same anywhere else, as far as that goes. I had a sort of feeling it would be worse where I wasn't known; but after all I shall have to go, I suppose.'

Poor Stephen seemed to feel it a great relief to talk about his troubles. For one thing he had the comfort of knowing that his friend thoroughly sympathised

with him and pitied him. Though no words had passed between them on the subject, Stephen knew perfectly well that Jackson had never for a moment believed him to be guilty, and this made him able to talk without any feeling of restraint, or fear of painful remarks.

'Why not ask Mr. Charles Spencer to take you on at the factory?' Jackson remarked, cutting a slice of bread with great deliberation.

Stephen started.

'Mr. Charles? Why, he would be the last person in the world to help me.'

'I'm not so sure of that,' said the policeman coolly. 'In fact, I strongly suspect he would be quite willing to do it—ay, and a little more than willing!'

Stephen looked eagerly at the other, but Jackson, with the most inscrutable face, was buttering his slice of bread, as if all his thoughts were concentrated on that important piece of work. Stephen sat for some minutes absorbed in deep thought; and Jackson, after glancing sharply at him, worked away steadily at his supper and left him to think the matter out for himself without interruption.

'I don't think I *could* ask him,' said Stephen at length; 'he might think I was insulting him. Besides, I doubt if he knows I've come back. I have not seen him except at a distance.'

'Oh yes, he does. He asked me the other day what you were doing.'

'He asked you what I was doing?' repeated Stephen, half incredulously.

'Well, he went a roundabout way to get at it,' rejoined Jackson, laughing, 'but that was what it came to. I suppose you would go back to the factory, if he would take you on, wouldn't you?'

'Yes,' said Stephen slowly. 'It would be horribly disagreeable; but, of course, I must do whatever I can get, and I would rather do anything till the end of the year than go away. I should make up my mind to bear it—not that there is the least chance of it.'

'Stranger things than that have happened before now,' said the other sententiously, getting up as he spoke. 'I don't like turning you out, old fellow, but you had better be getting home. It's nearly morning as it is. I'll walk up with you;' a kindness which Stephen thoroughly appreciated, as he saw the suspicious looks of the constables they met on the way.

'Stephen,' said his friend, as he opened the door of his room, 'don't be down-hearted; things will mend soon, I'm thinking. Could you manage to be down by the wooden bridge near the factory to-morrow morning at about eleven?'

'Yes, of course I could,' replied Stephen wonderingly. 'I've nothing to do but dawdle about. But why?'

'Never mind why,' returned the other. 'Just come, that's all. Good-night—or rather good-morning!' and nodding cheerfully, Jackson hurried off.

CHAPTER VII

VICTORIOUS HERCULES

'GOOD-MORNING, Mr. Spencer. Very cold wind to-day, sir.'

Charles Spencer, who had stopped on his way to the factory, and was leaning over the rails of the little wooden bridge, throwing some crumbs to a number of white ducks in the water below, looked round and returned Jackson's salutation.

'Very cold, in the north-east, I should think,' he remarked, putting the fur collar of his thick overcoat closer round his neck.

'The ducks seem hungry this morning,' Jackson observed, picking some crumbs off the rail, and tossing them to a particularly clamorous member of the family. 'They evidently know when to expect you, sir.'

'Yes, I always feed them as I pass, and they are in a great commotion if I'm a little late.'

Jackson made some casual remarks about the

curious way in which animals can calculate time, to which Mr. Spencer assented.

'By the way, sir,' he said presently, glancing up the road beyond Mr. Spencer, 'you were saying something about Ashton the other day. I am afraid he is in very low water just now.'

He turned away as he spoke, and appeared intent on brushing a little dust off his sleeve; but he noticed that Mr. Spencer's hand, just then extended with the last of the crumbs, shook visibly.

'How is that?' he asked, after a momentary pause.

'Well, you see, sir, nobody cares to employ him now,—their other men are apt to make themselves disagreeable about it,—so that he has not been able to earn anything. I found him late last night almost done for, and he told me he had had nothing to eat all day, and very little for a good many days. It's some time since he had a good meal, to judge by the look of him.'

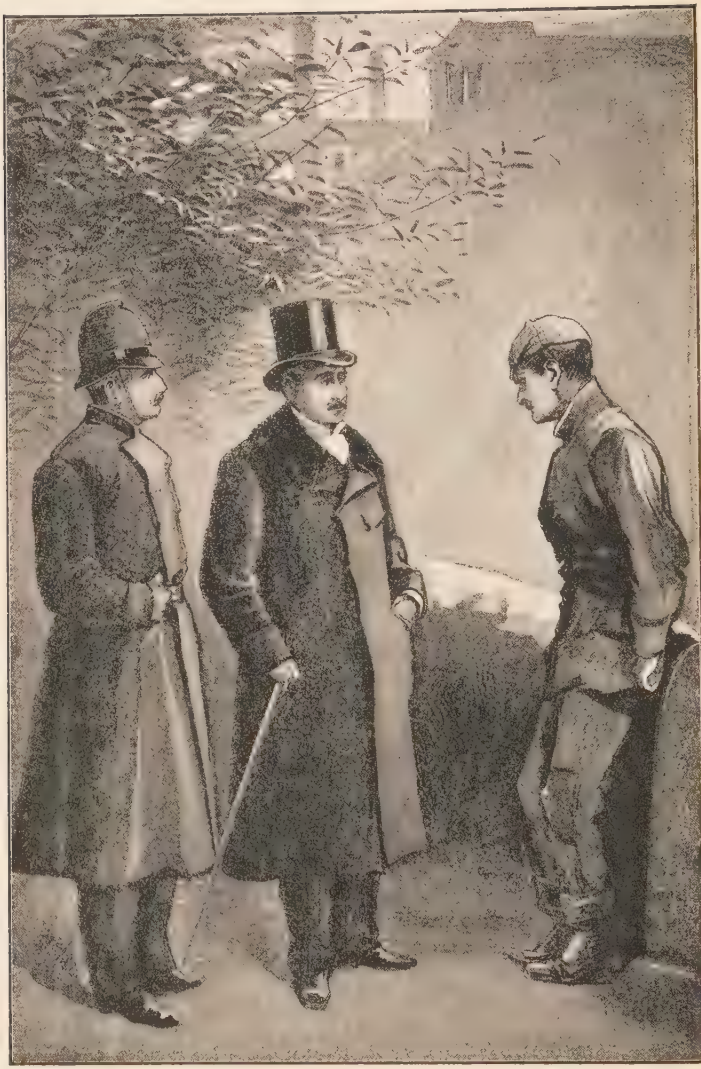
Jackson still kept his face determinately turned away, and brushed diligently at his coat.

'Do you think,' began Charles hesitatingly, 'that he would—come back to the factory?'

I think he would, sir. Of course he would not find it pleasant, but I know he wants to stay here till his time is up, at all events.'

'I don't think you can expect me to ask him,' said Charles sharply, 'but if he doesn't mind'—

'I may tell him you have no objection?'



'None whatever. I should be'— Mr. Spencer began eagerly, but checked himself abruptly.

'Then I'll tell him so now,' Jackson said coolly. 'I see he is just coming up the road.'

Stephen, who had been aimlessly sauntering along, without the slightest suspicion of what his friend had got in his head, stopped at seeing that he was talking to someone, and as Charles Spencer with a start turned sharply round, they came face to face. The two men looked at one another for a minute, both mentally recalling the occasion on which they had last met one another, and both a good deal upset at the recollection. Neither spoke, and Stephen, touching his hat, was going on, when, at a glance from Charles, Jackson stopped him.

'Stay a minute, Ashton,' he said. 'Mr. Spencer has just been telling me that he will take you on at the factory, if you will go there.'

A silence—broken only by the quacking and splashing of the ducks in the water below. Stephen stood with his back to the others and his hand clasping the rail, evidently struggling with himself, and when at last he answered he had some difficulty in controlling his voice.

'I have very little choice, Jackson, as you know. I must do anything I can, and if Mr. Spencer will let me'—

Mr. Spencer moved suddenly, and the sentence remained unfinished.

'I think Mr. Charles is quite willing that you should work for him,' remarked Jackson, as neither of the others seemed inclined to speak.

'Yes, quite,' said Charles nervously, 'quite. I don't mind at all. Ashton,' addressing him suddenly, '*will* you come?'

Something in the tone of his voice made Jackson look curiously at him, and had a strange effect upon Stephen.

'Are you quite sure it will not be disagreeable to you, Mr. Spencer?' he said, turning round and speaking in his natural manner. 'I want to stay here if I can, so I should be glad enough to get on at the factory, but not if you would dislike it very much.'

'I don't at all,' said Charles confusedly. 'If you dont mind, I don't. I shall be very—glad to give you work.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Stephen quietly. 'I am afraid, though, that some of the men will not like me to work with them, and if not'—

'They had better not object to anyone I choose to employ,' interrupted Mr. Charles angrily. 'I shall do as I please about that, and if any of them do not like working with you, they can find work elsewhere. If any of them are disagreeable to you, tell me, and I'll'—again he checked himself.

'No, it is for me to go away, not them,' said Stephen, rather sadly, 'if they say anything to you about it. I will keep out of their way as much as

possible, and I do not think it need hurt them; but perhaps it is only natural they should dislike having anything to do with a—a—convict.'

'*Don't*, Ashton!' broke from Charles Spencer almost involuntarily.

'Then can I come to-morrow, sir, if you can find me something to do? I don't care what it is.'

'Yes, I will tell Mr. Markham you will be there in the morning, and you will do the same work you did before.'

'Thank you, sir. Good-morning.'

Jackson could almost have declared that Charles Spencer was on the point of saying 'Thank you' too! but, if so, he stopped himself, and went on to the factory, just saying, 'Good-morning, Jackson,' as he passed him.

'I'm very much obliged to you, Harry,' said Stephen. 'Of course, it is a great relief to me to have got work—though I rather dread to-morrow,' he added gloomily.

'It won't be as bad as you expect, I daresay,' his friend said cheerfully. 'I think about the hardest thing is over.'

'And what do you suppose that was?'

'Saying "Thank you" to Mr. Charles,' said Jackson meaningly, glancing keenly at Stephen's face.

'Well, it was rather an odd thing,' Stephen said thoughtfully. 'Some time ago I should have thought it was impossible, but it didn't seem a bit difficult

to-day. How terribly ill he looks! I thought he would have got all right again by this time, but he looks as if he suffered very much still. I am very sorry for him, that I am.'

Which remark rather amused Jackson, as he imagined the feelings of the good folks of Arlingham, had they heard it.

So they parted, Jackson going off to duty, and Stephen making his way to catch his Irish friend on his way home to dinner.

'O'Brien,' he said, as he met him in the lane, 'will you do me a kindness?'

'Half a hundred if I can, my boy,' was the ready reply.

'I've got some work at last, and I'm going on to-morrow; but you see I have done nothing yet, and I shan't get paid till next week, and'—

Before he could finish his sentence, O'Brien's hand was in his pocket, and he threw his purse to Stephen.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' he said, in an injured tone. 'I'll be bound it's half starving yourself you've been. Now I come to look at you, you're as thin as a barn-door fowl that's been fed on half a pratie a day! And you call that being friends with a feller—why, you couldn't have done more if I'd been your worst enemy!'

'I might have done less, and not asked at all,' said Stephen, smiling as he returned the purse. 'You're a

good fellow, O'Brien, and I knew I could ask you. You shall have it back next week.'

'I've the best mind in the world not to take it back at all, after the way you have treated me,' grumbled O'Brien. 'Where are you going to work?'

'I'm coming with you again, Paddy. Mr. Charles Spencer has taken me on at the factory.'

'Whew! whew! Sure you're never meaning that!' exclaimed O'Brien, in utter amazement. 'Did you ask him, or did he ask you?'

'I don't quite know,' returned Stephen. 'Jackson managed it, I think.'

'Good for that boy!' said the Irishman, clapping his hands together. 'For one of that meddlesome lot, I must say *that* boy is a decent sort of chap—almost as good as if he had had the luck to be born in Tipperary!'

So Stephen began work again in the same place, but with very different feelings. Williams and O'Brien greeted him kindly, and befriended him in every way they could, but the rest of the men ignored him, and many were not above openly sneering at him, and taking every opportunity of annoying him. Worst of all, the foreman was prejudiced against him, and had even remonstrated with Charles Spencer for employing him. The curt reply of Charles that he chose to employ him, and that was enough, had only tended to increase Mr. Markham's dislike, and as this was soon apparent to all, the men became more open in their persecution, perhaps hoping to rouse the fiery

temper that had been so well known to them in former days, and thus justify the foreman in getting him dismissed. But in this they were disappointed. Stephen never replied to any of their unkind speeches, though his friend Williams often saw by his face how much he was hurt by them, and never spoke to anyone but Williams and O'Brien. He kept entirely away from the others, often not uttering a word the whole day except when addressed by Mr. Markham, and not seeming conscious of, or resenting in the slightest degree, the contemptuous, bullying tone in which the foreman always spoke to him.

Mr. Charles Spencer, as if satisfied with having provided him with work, did not take the slightest notice of him, and seldom came to the end of the room where he worked. It was not till Stephen had been working there for more than two months that an attempt to do a kindness led him to speak to his employer.

A young man named Hinton, who worked close to Stephen, and who, though not quite as bad as some of the others, was barely civil to him, and constantly allowed himself the pleasure of laughing at the cutting speeches of the others, by some accident damaged the piece of work on which he was engaged. The foreman angrily accused him of shameful carelessness, if not of wilful mischief, and threatened to report him to Mr. Charles and send him about his business. In vain Hinton pleaded that it was the first time such a

thing had happened, and promised greater care for the future. He was one of a large family, and to be thrown suddenly out of work would have been a great misfortune both to him and to his parents; nor was it possible for him, out of his earnings, to repair the damage he had done.

The foreman would listen to nothing, and Charles Spencer coming into the room at that moment, Mr. Markham showed him the spoilt work, and declared it was impossible to keep a good-for-nothing fellow like that. Unfortunately for Hinton, Mr. Spencer was in one of the irritable moods to which he had been subject of late, and cutting short the poor lad's pleadings, he summarily dismissed him. Stephen had been listening to the conversation, while continuing to work, and, after hesitating a moment, he put down his tools and turned to Mr. Spencer.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said in a low voice; 'perhaps I ought not to say anything, but Hinton has been working very well and carefully up to to-day, and this was entirely an accident.'

The foreman glared angrily at Stephen, and was beginning some remark, but Charles stopped him.

'You saw it done,' he inquired, less irritably than he had spoken before, 'and do not think it was carelessness?'

'No, sir; Hinton is a very good workman, and this might have happened to the most experienced hand here.'

'In that case I will overlook it,' said Mr. Spencer to the culprit. 'Of course, if you are a good workman and generally careful, I don't want to be hard upon you for an accident. You may go on with your work. Markham, I want you in the office.'

Without even glancing at Stephen, or listening to the thanks of the relieved Hinton, Mr. Charles departed, taking with him the scowling and aggrieved foreman.

That evening, as Stephen was pursuing his solitary way down the lane to his home, he was overtaken by Hinton, who lived on that side of the town.

'I couldn't get at you before,' he said, as he came up with him. 'I want to thank you for what you said to-day. I don't know what we should do if I had no work. Father has been ill for weeks, and none of the others can earn much. We should have been in a terrible plight if it had not been for you.'

'I am glad you got off, lad,' said Stephen, 'but I don't think I had much to do with it.'

'Why, if it hadn't been for your speaking to Mr. Spencer, I should have been turned away. It was awfully good of you, and I didn't deserve it, when I've so often'— He stopped in some confusion.

'Never mind that, Hinton,' said Stephen kindly. 'I was very glad to do what I could for you, and it is to Mr. Spencer's advantage too not to lose a good workman for a mere accident.'

'That detestable Markham is always down on a fellow if he can get the chance,' said Hinton. 'I cannot imagine how you can bear his speaking to you in the way he does. I should fly out at him, I know, if I were in your place.'

'Then you would be very wrong,' said Stephen, rather sternly, 'and I hope you would be wiser than that. Don't you think the lesson I have had against giving way to violent passions is enough to keep me from even *thinking* angrily again? And I could bear him well enough,' he went on, more to himself than to his companion, 'if it were not for the others.'

'It's a beastly shame!' burst out Hinton impetuously. 'They're a set of brutes to go on as they do!'

'I suppose they think I've no business among them,' said Stephen. 'Besides, I don't think they quite know how it—*hurts*.'

'And I have been as bad,' said Hinton penitently, 'but I won't again, if you'll have me for a friend. Only I'm not worth much, after the way I've behaved.'

'I think you are worth a good deal,' said Stephen, much cheered by the other's friendly tone. 'You see you cannot even imagine what it feels like to have everyone avoiding you, so you don't understand how much good you have done me this evening. Now that Williams and O'Brien work in the other room, I have no one to speak a word to.'

'But you'll talk to me, won't you?' said Hinton, a little shyly, scarcely knowing what to say.

'Of course I should like it,' returned Stephen, 'but you mustn't feel bound to stick to it, lad, if the other men annoy you about it.'

'I'm not such a coward as that!' said the other hotly. 'They may say what they like, for all I care. Good-night, and thank you again.'

'Good-night, Hinton,' said Stephen, very much pleased at having made a new friend, and feeling much happier for having been able to do a service, however slight, for one of his fellow-workmen.

He knew that it would probably make Mr. Markham more disagreeable to him than ever, but that could not be helped, and to set against that was the friendship of the grateful lad. 'If only the others don't worry him out of it,' he thought, with a sigh; 'I shouldn't blame him for drawing back if they set upon him for it.'

But, whatever the men said or did, from that evening Stephen had no firmer friend than Alfred Hinton.

CHAPTER VIII

'AS WE FORGIVE THEM'

HAT on earth is up?' exclaimed Hinton to Stephen one morning some months later. 'There seems a smartish bit of a breeze going on. Rough outside and rough in,' he continued, laughing, as a sharp wind blew against the nearest to them. 'Oh, it's Smith this time, is it? Well, it serves him right, whatever he gets.'

He settled himself to his work, as if not caring much about the matter, but Stephen looked up for a minute, and saw that the foreman, with an open letter in his hand and evidently in a towering rage, was storming loudly at Smith, who, half sulkily, half angrily, was denying something of which the other was accusing him. The altercation was becoming so loud that most of the men stopped to listen, and in the lull several disjointed sentences reached Stephen's ears.

'What's it about, lad?' he asked Hinton, who was rather nearer.

'Can't quite get at it,' said Hinton, listening. 'Sort of "you did," "I didn't," kind of thing just now! Something to do with some goods Smith was taking to the station, Monday week—was late for the train, it seems, and they were to have gone abroad, and were not in time—and were damaged besides. So he's in a rage about it—says Smith had been drinking—*that's* not unlikely! Smith says he had not, and that the horse bolted and upset the cart, and made him late. Mr. Markham won't believe him, and he's got the sack. Bad thing for his family. Why, what's the matter, Ashton?'

'Nothing, lad,' returned Stephen, and bent over his work; but, all unknown to his friend, a terrible battle was going on within him.

He knew that Smith's story was true, but should he say so, it would be at a cost only known to himself. He knew he would not be believed, he knew to what it would expose him, and, of all men in the world, for Smith! He leant his head on his hands, and his thoughts wandered back into the past.

The voices of the men round him, the chink of their tools, changed to the sound of muffled footsteps and jingling keys—round him once more closed those narrow white walls, that silence that might almost be felt. And in the silence he seemed almost to *hear*

himself repeating over and over again, in the effort to be honest before One who knew how much the words were worth—'Forgive us our trespasses—*as we forgive them.*'

Had he meant it then, or were the words after all mere repetitions? Had he meant it then? did he mean it now?

The struggle was soon over. Stephen pushed his hair off his forehead, brushed the dust off his hands, and walked quietly to the other end of the room.

'Smith's account of what happened is perfectly true, sir,' he said respectfully. 'I was walking a little distance behind the cart, and can assure you that he went straight to the station.'

'You!' ejaculated the foreman, in such a contemptuous tone that Stephen pressed his lips tightly together for a moment.

'The horse shied at the steam roller,' he went on, in the same quiet tone, 'and upset the cart, and it took some ten minutes to get the things right again. Smith could not possibly have been in time; the train had started before he got the cart loaded again.'

Most of the men, by this time, had paused in their work, and several gradually drew nearer to listen, curious to see how it would end.

'And what were you doing there?' Mr. Markham demanded angrily. 'Why were you not at work?'

'I was obliged to be away, sir; and Mr. Spencer had given me leave to go.'

Williams, who was standing near his friend, saw that Stephen's hands were clenched tightly together behind his back; but he stood perfectly still, his tall, powerful frame motionless as a statue, his dark eyes absolutely free from any sign of temper, his voice perfectly under control.

'Do you suppose,' said the foreman sarcastically, 'that I shall take *your* word any more than Smith's, that you interfere in what is no concern of yours?'

'Probably not, sir; but if you will ask the inspector who was on duty at the police station that morning, he will tell you that he was speaking to me when the accident happened, and he remarked that it would make Smith too late for the usual train. He would also tell you that Smith was perfectly sober, but was not able to control the horse for some minutes.'

'I don't believe there is a word of truth in it!' said Mr. Markham angrily. 'If you were there, why didn't Smith get you to help him? Did he see you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And spoke to you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then if you didn't choose to help him when you knew there was no time to be lost, you are as bad as he is, and I've a good mind you should go too.'

Stephen said nothing.

'Why didn't you help him, I ask you?' thundered the foreman.

'I would have helped him, sir, but the — the inspector told me not to go to him.'

'Why?'

'Because I said I didn't want the fellow!' growled Smith, in a surly tone. 'I told him I wouldn't have any ticket-of'—

'You mean, cowardly brute to say such a thing!' exclaimed Hinton, springing forward impetuously, while one or two of the men muttered, 'Shame! shame!' in the background. 'You deserve to be'—

'Hush, Hinton,' Stephen interposed, so sternly that his champion stopped abruptly. 'Stand back and be quiet.'

'He will have no opportunity of saying it again here,' said a voice behind. 'Mr. Markham, be so good as to pay Smith what is due to him, and send him off the premises at once.'

The men all started. They had been too much interested in what was going on to notice that Charles Spencer had come up behind them. Stephen glanced in his direction, and seeing that he was as white as a sheet, and seemed scarcely able to stand, hastily fetched a bench from the other side of the room, and then went back to his former place.

'I think, sir,' he said quietly, addressing himself to Mr. Charles, 'that what Smith said I was has nothing to do with the matter. Perhaps you will be kind enough to hear what it is that Mr. Markham is complaining of, and leave the rest.'

'Well, be quick about it then,' said Mr. Charles, sitting down wearily, and putting his hand to his head. 'I am not well enough this morning to be bothered in this way.'

Mr. Markham repeated the story, enlarging on the annoyance caused to one of their best customers, and asserting that in all probability Smith had been dawdling at a public-house drinking, and got late in that way.

'It is hardly likely we should take *Ashton's* word for what happened,' he concluded, with cutting emphasis.

Mr. Spencer winced slightly, and became, if possible, a shade paler.

'I fail to see why not, Markham,' he said calmly. 'Ashton, let me hear your account of it.'

Stephen repeated what he had said before, and Mr. Spencer listened attentively, though evidently in some pain.

'There seems no doubt that Smith was perfectly sober, and in no way to blame for the accident,' he said, when Stephen had finished, 'so he cannot in justice be discharged for that. But understand, Smith,' turning to him, 'I will not have Ashton annoyed while he works for me, and if you cannot keep a civil tongue in your head you will go. Do you hear?'

'Yes, sir,' growled Smith, in a furious rage, but thinking it prudent not to show it.

'Though, for very shame, I should think you would not do so again,' Charles went on, 'after what he has done for you. Go on with your work now, men, and don't waste any more time.'

The men hastily dispersed, Stephen going back to his corner, where he sat down and remained for some minutes with his face hidden in his hands. He could not bear much more, he thought; as soon as he could, he would go—anywhere, so that he might be out of the reach of unkind looks and cruel speeches.

'You're a brave fellow, Stephen,' said Williams, coming up to him; 'not many men would have done that,' and, seeing his friend was a good deal upset, he hurried off.

'No, indeed; I shouldn't think they would,' said Hinton warmly.

'There is something to be said for you, too, in that way,' said Stephen, looking up and smiling. 'I didn't mean to snub you, lad, and I'm grateful indeed for the friendship that made you say what you did, but I didn't want you to get into a quarrel with Smith.'

'The fellow never said "Thank you" even,' said Hinton indignantly.

'That doesn't matter; I didn't expect he would'— Stephen was beginning, when, happening to glance out of the window near him, he suddenly uttered an exclamation. 'Why, Mr. Spencer is on the bridge, and I believe'— and, without waiting to finish his sentence, he ran hastily down the room.

On the opposite side of the yard, facing the room where Stephen worked, another block of buildings had been erected some years before, and, to save the men the long tramp down and up again, should anything be wanted from either of the highest rooms, the two top stories had been connected by a light bridge thrown across from a door at the end of the passage in each block. A flight of steep iron steps led down to the yard on the other side. Although perfectly safe and secured by a hand-rail on each side, it was necessarily as light as possible, and, to prevent any chance of an accident, the boys in the factory were strictly forbidden to use it at any time, and the men if the wind were at all rough.

It was well known that Mr. Spencer had always disliked the bridge, and very rarely crossed it—since his illness he had never done so. This morning, either upset by what had happened or anxious to get home as quickly as possible, on leaving the room he had gone out of the door at the end of the passage.

The wind was rather high, and, just as he reached the middle, a sudden gust caused the bridge to sway slightly, and Mr. Charles, who could not at the best of times stand on a height without his head becoming dizzy, was quite unnerved, and clung tightly to the rail, utterly unable to go either backward or forward, and fearing every moment that another gust might cause him to loose his hold. It was in vain that he assured himself that there was really no danger—

that he was not likely to slip under the rails—that a few more steps would land him in safety. He *could* not move, and was beginning to experience the dreadful sensation that he was actually falling, when, to his unutterable relief, he felt someone take hold of his arm.

'What is it, sir? are you faint?'

'Yes—giddy—or something,' gasped Mr. Charles, clinging to Stephen with both hands. 'This horrible bridge!'

'You are quite safe now, sir,' said Stephen gently. 'Let me help you over.'

Mr. Charles took hold of the rail again and tried to move forward, but another gust at that moment shook the bridge more violently than before, and he drew back shuddering.

'My head,' he murmured faintly. 'I shall be down in a minute.'

Stephen passed his arm round his shoulders and held him firmly.

'There's no danger,' he said reassuringly. 'I could hold you if you did slip. Shut your eyes, sir, and don't think about it.'

Greatly relieved at feeling Stephen's strong arms round him, Mr. Charles closed his eyes and leant against him.

'What's the matter, Ashton?' called out the foreman, who had come to the door, with several of the men.

'Mr. Spencer is very faint,' returned Stephen, without looking round. 'Don't come on the bridge; it makes it shake more. I'll bring him down to the office, if you will get some brandy. Mr. Spencer, put your arm over my shoulder, please; now, let go the rail and take hold of my collar.' Mr. Charles mechanically obeyed. 'That's it, sir. Keep your eyes shut a moment longer.'

As he spoke, Stephen lifted Mr. Spencer in his arms, and stepping steadily over the bridge and down the steps, he carried him across the yard and into the office.

'Now you are all right,' he said cheerfully, placing Mr. Spencer in a chair. 'You mustn't go across the bridge again when you are not feeling well, sir, I think.'

Charles released Stephen's collar, which he was still clutching tightly, and tried to speak.

'Oh, don't mention it, sir. I hope you will soon be better,' and Mr. Markham appearing at that moment, Stephen retreated.

'What was the matter, Ashton?' inquired one of the men as he passed him.

'Mr. Spencer turned giddy and faint,' replied Stephen, rather surprised, for Carter had not spoken to him before. 'The bridge swung about a good deal in the wind, and I think his head was bad to start with.'

'Very lucky you saw him,' commented the other.

'If he had fainted, it might have been awkward for him.'

Stephen agreed, and went to his work; but, though he had lost a good bit of time that morning, what with one thing and another, he sat thinking for some minutes before he began again.

He roused himself at last, and set to work with redoubled energy; but Hinton, looking at him from time to time, saw that his thoughts were not with his work, and wondered what had happened.

When the dinner-hour came and the others had left, Stephen went off to the corner of the yard, where he usually ate his meal, under the shelter of a small shed. He was sitting, absorbed in melancholy thoughts, when Carter strolled up to him.

'We're all alone to-day,' he observed, seating himself on the ground with his back to the wall, 'and there's a bitterly cold wind out there.'

Stephen assented briefly.

'You're not much of an eater,' Carter remarked, after a few minutes' silence, glancing at Stephen's untasted meal, 'and not much of a talker either!' with a laugh.

'I'm rather out of practice,' said Stephen, rousing himself, seeing that Carter meant to be friendly.

'Well, you can speak to some purpose at times, luckily for some folks,' returned the other; and he went on talking, without seeming to notice whether Stephen answered or not. When the bell rang and

both men prepared to resume work, Carter looked at Stephen, and remarked in a would-be casual manner, 'If you would like to practise talking upon me, mate, I'm quite agreeable.'

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Stephen shook it.

'Thank you,' was all he said.

'Wonder if we have all been mistaken,' thought Carter, as he followed him across the yard. 'I'm beginning to think that fellow is as good as the rest of us, and if he is as *good*, he's a pretty long way *better*!'

CHAPTER IX

FAITHFUL AND TRUE

STEPHEN ASHTON was walking home from work in a far more cheerful mood than he had been in since the day that O'Brien had overtaken him in the lane. For one thing, it was a lovely summer evening, the sun had been shining all day, and the world looked bright and pleasant. For another, one or two of the men were more friendly now, and spoke to him when they came across him, which made him feel a little less an outcast.

But, above all, it was over ! The miserable feeling of being always watched, of being expected to give an account of himself, of never feeling certain what might not be said of him—all this was over, and he felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off him. Now he could go where he pleased, do as he pleased, and no one could say anything. So he sauntered slowly along the road, thinking with great relief that

whatever else he might have to bear, at least that unpleasant business was over.

He was thinking, too, how entirely his feelings towards his employer had changed. Since the day when Mr. Spencer had clung to him in full confidence of his help, and had been carried helplessly in those strong arms, he had felt for him a strange friendliness, almost amounting to affection. Moreover, as he expressed it to himself, it had been 'borne in upon him' in some mysterious way, at the moment Charles Spencer had raised those imploring eyes to his, that his conjectures about that miserable affair were correct. Ever since he had come back, Mr. Spencer's manner to him, his anxiety to give him work, his wish that he should not be annoyed, his evident desire to show that he fully believed his word—all pointed to the same conclusion, that he was bitterly sorry now for something he had done.

What that had been, Stephen was not quite sure, but he thought he could make a pretty good guess. And he also guessed that the mental struggle between Mr. Spencer's better nature urging to speak out and put things right as far as possible, and his natural shrinking from the unpleasant consequences, was partly the cause of his ill-health.

'I wish he wouldn't worry about it,' thought Stephen. 'It's over now, and can't be helped; and I think I would rather he didn't say anything, it would be so horribly disagreeable for him. I would tell

him so, if I could; but I can't very well do that! I hope he will get better again soon.'

For, though he was able to attend to a little business at home, it was more than a fortnight since Mr. Charles had been into the factory, and the last few days he had been very ill.

Then Stephen's thoughts flew to Annie Morris, and he wondered whether she would write to him, and whether, if she wished it, he ought to let her marry him. For, in spite of his having refused to let her consider herself bound to him, and having always maintained that she was perfectly free to marry anyone else, deep down in the bottom of his heart was a conviction that would not be stifled, that she would be true to him. He argued with himself that he ought not to allow it, that it would be wrong to let her tie herself to one over whose life such a cloud hung; but, notwithstanding this, he found himself considering whether he might not go and see for himself what her feelings were on the subject.

Absorbed in this idea, he was turning in at his gate, when a pair of boyish arms were thrown tightly round him in a very thoroughly energetic bear's hug, and a boyish voice shouted in tones of intense delight—

'Uncle Stephen! Uncle Stephen!'

'Why, Sidney!' exclaimed Stephen, in utter amazement. 'Why, Sidney, what brings you here? and how you have grown! Is this really little Sid?'

'It is indeed,' the boy said proudly. 'I thought you would hardly know me. I'm nearly twelve now, you see. What a time you have been coming! I wanted to see you ever so much, and we have been waiting and waiting such a long while!'

We! Stephen's heart began to beat till it nearly choked him. Of course it was *most* unlikely Annie should be in this neighbourhood! of course it was *most* improbable that she should have come to see him! And yet Stephen quickened his pace up the path, and pushed open the door with a very unsteady hand.

Certainly things did not look quite as usual! A bright fire was burning in a clean, well-swept grate, the floor had undergone a thorough cleaning, and his few possessions had been carefully dusted and arranged. A very appetising smell of bacon pervaded the room, evidently proceeding from a frying-pan set on the hob, a clean cloth was spread on the table with ample provisions for a meal, and, as Stephen saw at a glance, the table was laid for *three*!

'Stephen!'

He turned hastily round, and then, without a moment's hesitation, all his well-meant intentions, all his self-denying scruples were thrown to the wind.

'Annie!'

And if Annie Morris objected to being suddenly clasped in a pair of strong arms in a way which made breathing a work of some difficulty, she undoubtedly

did not show it. On the contrary, she returned the compliment, and with her arms over his broad shoulders murmured, 'Stephen, dear Stephen,' until tears stopped her, while Stephen could not attempt to speak.

'What silly people we are!' she said at last, releasing herself, and laughing through her tears. 'Sidney looks quite frightened at us, and the bacon will be done to a cinder! Take it off the fire, Sid, there's a dear boy! and, Stephen, do go and wash your hands and come to tea. We have lots to talk about, and Sidney and I must get back to-night.'

It may be easily supposed that Stephen was not long before he reappeared, though he had contrived in those few minutes not only to get himself up in his best clothes, but to say a few words of thanks to Him from whom all good things come. So they sat down to tea, and at first seemed to be quite contented to look at one another, and it was 'little Sid' who broke the silence.

'Uncle Stephen, I want to ask you something.'

'Well, my boy, what is it?'

'When you and Aunt Annie are married, may I come and live with you?'

Stephen looked across at Annie, and then they both laughed—the first time Stephen had really laughed for six long years, if Annie had but known it. This was cutting the Gordian knot in the most unhesitating manner!

'Well, may I?' continued Sidney, quite unconscious of the feelings of his auditors, and determined to get

an answer. 'Aunt Annie said I might, till I was old enough to go to the farm; only she didn't know whether you would like to go away somewhere. *I* wanted to come and see you ever so long ago to ask you, but Aunt Annie wouldn't come till to-day, though I know she has been wishing to-day to come nearly as much as I have!'

'Perhaps a little more, Sid,' said Annie softly.

Stephen smiled, but said nothing.

'I don't call this a *very* nice house,' pursued Sidney, looking round with some disdain, 'but I suppose it doesn't matter for a short time. Aunt Annie says you are going to have a very nice one soon, and she has been making and buying a lot of pretty things for it already.'

'He's letting the cat out of the bag, isn't he, Annie?' said Stephen, in a very unsteady tone, and looking at her with swimming eyes.

'Yes; in fact, it's out now, all but its tail,' replied Annie merrily, determined to keep Stephen away from gloomy thoughts if possible, 'and its tail is the most important part of it!'

'If it is a Persian cat,' remarked Sidney, in all seriousness, stirring his tea thoughtfully, 'not if it is a Manx. Uncle Stephen, haven't Manx cats really got tails?'

'I don't think I've ever come across one, Sid. I did see a cat without a tail once, it's true, but'—

'Was it a Manx?' interrupted Sidney eagerly.

'Well, no; it had met with an unfortunate accident

—in fact, it left its tail in the hinge of one of the factory doors!'

'Oh, poor beast!' said Sidney, laughing. 'I'm sorry for it, but I daresay it was quite as happy without it. There was no fear of it being pulled, at any rate! But you haven't said yet if I may live with you.'

'Certainly, my boy, if Aunt Annie likes.'

'Oh, you dear good uncle! you best of uncles!' exclaimed the boy, jumping up and throwing his arms round Stephen's neck. 'And may I keep some rabbits and some long-haired guinea-pigs?'

'My dear Sid,' said Stephen, returning his embrace, 'if you are going to keep a menagerie, you must ask Aunt Annie to find us a house big enough for such a large party.'

'Oh, Aunt Annie likes animals, so she won't mind.'

And in this way Stephen and Annie found their marriage a settled thing, and fell into Sidney's plans in the most comfortable manner. The important point of the animals being settled to Sidney's satisfaction, he became lost in meditation over the respective merits of black and white or silver-grey rabbits, while Stephen and Annie discussed various small matters connected with themselves and the people in the town, Annie determinately keeping the conversation away from all painful subjects. The meal was protracted to a most unconscionable length, and Sidney got tired of it and went off to roam about in the lane; but at last Annie declared they must be going.

'Call Sidney, please, Stephen,' she said, as she put the tea-things away in the cupboard, 'and then I want you to carry my basket to the station for me.'

She spoke in such a matter-of-fact way, that Stephen did not at first see that she intended the gossips of Arlingham, of whom there were as many in that town as in most others, to have the privilege of seeing them walking together the whole length of the street.

'God bless her!' he said to himself, as he stood at the gate waiting for Sidney, 'and I hope He will help me to be a good husband to her. I'll do my best to make her happy.'

'The cat's tail had better come out now, Stephen,' said Annie, as they were waiting for the train to start, 'and that is, that you will soon see us again. We are both coming in a few weeks to stay at the farm for a fortnight or so; I don't want Sidney to forget the old place.'

This was a great consolation to Stephen, as, after many vociferous farewells from Sidney, he turned homeward, thinking what a happy time he had had. But the events of the day were not over.

He was just passing the top of the street leading to the factory, when he heard himself called, and turning, saw Mr. Spencer's housemaid hurrying after him.

'I was coming to find you, and now I've met you it will save me a walk,' she said. 'Mr. Charles wants you to come and see him.'

'Wants *me*?'

'Yes; he is very bad this evening. I don't believe the doctor thinks much of him; anyway, he told Mr. Spencer that Mr. Charles *must* be kept quiet, and, as he had set his heart on seeing you, you were to be fetched at once. It's his head is so bad, I believe.'

Stephen turned and followed her down the street without making any remark. He was taken at once into a room where old Mr. Spencer was reclining in a low armchair, and the doctor was standing by the window.

'My son seems to wish very much to see you,' began Mr. Spencer, rather nervously, 'but I don't know whether he ought—whether it will do him harm. What do you think, doctor?'

'It will be much better for Spencer to see him, and to see him at once,' said Dr. Wilson decidedly.

'You won't say anything to upset him, will you?' said Mr. Spencer entreatingly.

'No, sir; I will not.'

'He is very ill,' went on the father, looking and evidently feeling very unwilling to let Stephen go near his son, 'and I am afraid'—

'You had better go up to him at once, Ashton,' interposed the doctor. 'He is only making himself worse by worrying about your coming; but don't let him talk more than you can help.'

'No, sir.'

Stephen was moving to the door, but poor Mr.

Spencer's anxious face and evident nervousness touched him, and he went back to him.

'I will be very careful, sir,' he said gently. 'You may believe me when I say I would gladly do anything for Mr. Charles that I could. Please do not be afraid to trust me with him.'

Before Mr. Spencer could say anything, he followed the doctor out of the room and up the stairs.

'That is his room,' said Dr. Wilson, pointing to a door at the end of the passage. 'I do not know what is exciting him so much, but, whatever it is, he is rapidly getting worse. He has not had any proper sleep for some nights. If you could persuade him to keep quiet, and he could get to sleep, he might pull through; if not'— he left the sentence unfinished, and went downstairs again.

Stephen paused a minute, thinking, and then, knocking softly at the door, went in without waiting for an answer. Mr. Charles was tossing restlessly from side to side, and fixed his bright, feverish eyes on Stephen as he went up to the bed.

'I am sorry to see you so ill, sir,' said Stephen, looking down at him and speaking very quietly. 'How uncomfortably you are lying! Let me put you into a more comfortable position.'

He put his arm under Mr. Spencer's shoulders, without waiting for him to speak, raised him gently, shook up his pillow, and laid him down again.

'There, that's better,' he went on, rearranging the

disordered bedclothes. 'I've had a little nursing to do, and could turn my hand to it if I wished. You must lie still a bit now, sir; tumbling about like that only makes you hot.'

Poor Charles Spencer, who had been for days longing for, and yet dreading this interview, and had worked himself up into a state of anxiety and worry that had nearly upset his mind, was soothed at once by Stephen's quiet tone and matter-of-fact manner. He was silent for a few minutes, and then, looking up at Stephen, said slowly—

'Ashton, can you ever forgive me?'

'I've done that long ago, Mr. Charles,' replied Stephen, who had expected this question. 'Don't vex yourself about it any more.'

'Then you did know?' Charles said eagerly. 'I fancied you did.'

'I don't think I know quite all,' Stephen said. 'You did not see who it was, did you, sir?'

'Oh no, no! I was not as bad as that,' exclaimed Charles excitedly. 'Don't think that of me!'

'No, I did not think that was possible, but I saw you speaking to someone when I came up, and I felt sure you remembered more than you said you did.'

'Yes, I did,' said Charles, with a groan. 'I knew your story was true, and I would not say so. I was furious with you, and I—I wanted to get you out of the way.'

'Yes, sir; so I supposed,' said Stephen quietly.

'But I never thought it would be so long. I

thought it would be only a few months, and that it would serve you right. Was it very bad?'

'Yes—at first especially,' said Stephen, with a shiver. 'Don't talk about it, please, Mr. Charles; I can't bear it. But you know it was partly my own fault. If I had not lost my temper and threatened you, you would never have found out that I knew your secret; and if I had not been obliged to beg your pardon, I should not have followed you into the field. Besides, sir, if you had spoken, Smith would still have said what he did.'

'Yet you defended him the other day,' said Charles wonderingly. 'I think if you hadn't done that, I should not have dared to send for you now. Why did you?'

Stephen got very red, and muttered something in a low voice.

'That's what makes you forgive me, too, I suppose. But you must have hated me at the time.'

'I was very angry at first, but I knew I ought to fight against it; and, do you know, I think it was a good thing for me. I *could* not get the better of my temper; I suppose I was not really trying in the right way, and I was beginning to give up caring whether I gave way or not. I was getting afraid I should hurt someone, so I tried all the time to think that this was God's way of helping me, and that what He does is sure to be right. Then I was able to save a life, and that made me much happier.'

'So I heard. Mr. Bevan told me about it. How was it?'

'A man got into a rage and pushed one of the officers off the scaffolding we were on,' said Stephen, 'and I was just able to get hold of his coat. The fellow was so furious that he tried to force me to let go, and I had to hold him back with one hand. Of course, it was only a few minutes before the others came up, but they said they would not have thought it possible any man could have done it single-handed. So you see I was glad to be so strong. It did me good in other ways, too, for after that they knew they could trust me to behave well, and were not afraid I should turn restive, as I think they were at first.'

'I don't know what I am to do,' said Charles presently. 'I know I ought to make everything known, but if I do at present I shall be ruined.'

'Then let it be, sir. It's all over now.'

'You don't really mean you wouldn't care to be cleared?'

Stephen pondered the question a minute.

'I'm afraid I cannot honestly say quite that, Mr. Charles. Of course I should like people to know I was innocent, not only for my own sake but my future wife's.'

'Annie Morris hasn't given you up, then? I was afraid she might.'

'No, there was no fear of that,' said Stephen proudly. 'But if it would upset you, sir, leave it

alone. If Annie does not like living here, we can go away now. I daresay I can get work elsewhere, and you will say a good word for me,—as to my being a good workman, at least,—won't you sir?'

'Don't be cruel, Ashton!' said Charles, turning away his head.

'I didn't mean to be,' said Stephen hastily, vexed that the other had misunderstood him. 'Only it would look rather odd, to anyone who knew what had happened, that I should apply to you at all. Of course, I know you will do anything you can for me. I didn't mean I doubted that.'

'I'm afraid I am a horrible coward, but should you mind if I left it for a little longer?' said poor Mr. Charles pleadingly. 'They say I must go abroad for a year, to see if that will do me any good. If you would wait till I come back, I could defy him then. I am sure I have been wretched enough. I have such horrible nights; I can't sleep. Ashton, I wish you would stay with me to-night; I believe I could sleep if you were here.'

'Of course I will, sir,' said Stephen kindly, 'if Mr. Spencer does not mind. I'm sure you ought not to be left alone at night. I think you will have to let me come and nurse you. I should like to stay, if you'll trust me.' Poor Charles smiled faintly. 'But Dr. Wilson won't think much of me if I let you talk any more. You are quite tired out, and you must keep

quiet and go to sleep. I am going to sit close to you, in case you want anything.'

Ten minutes later, when poor Mr. Spencer, very uneasy about the result of this interview and unable to keep away any longer, stole softly into the room, followed by Dr. Wilson, it was to find 'that terrible fellow' sitting patiently by the bed, and his son peacefully and quietly asleep.

CHAPTER X

BRAVE AND STRONG

TIME passed on, and Stephen Ashton still worked at the factory, though at times much disposed to try his fortune elsewhere. Charles Spencer, as soon as he was well enough, had gone abroad, and before he went had extorted a kind of promise from Stephen that he would remain at Arlingham, if possible, till his return. Great had been the amazement of the people of the town at the unaccountable conduct of that gentleman previous to his departure. That, of all men in the world, he should have selected Stephen Ashton to be with him in his illness, seemed to them most extraordinary.

But such was the case. It was Stephen who sat up with him night after night, and who alone seemed able to quiet his restless fits and enable him to sleep; it was Stephen who lifted him on to the sofa when he began to recover, giving up his work at the factory

to stay with him; it was in Stephen's strong arms that he was carried out into the garden, in hopes that the air might give him strength. And finally, it was Stephen who accompanied him on the first stage of his journey, and saw him safely on board for the sea voyage from which so much was expected.

When it became known that Dr. Wilson emphatically declared that, under God, Mr. Spencer's recovery was due to Ashton's careful nursing and unwearied attention, what could everyone say but that there was no doubt he was sorry now for what he had done, and was glad to make any amends in his power? To his few friends who asked him any questions on the subject, Stephen only replied that Mr. Charles liked him because he was so strong and able to lift him so easily, as his illness had made him very nervous; while, for his part, he was glad to do anything for him that he could.

Probably the only person who had the slightest suspicion of the real truth was Jackson, and though he made no remark when he heard his neighbours wondering that Mr. Charles was not afraid to trust himself with Stephen, yet he indulged in many a laugh on the sly at their, to him, singular stupidity on the point.

'It will be a nice little surprise for them some day,' he thought, after gravely listening to some unusually strong opinion of Stephen, 'for it's quite evident to me from Stephen's face and manner that

Mr. Charles means to have it all out before long. It's a wonder to me other people don't see it, but there is no accounting for folks. I should have thought it was as plain as a pikestaff who had his knife! It was extraordinary to me that they didn't see at once that there was only one person he would have shielded. It's been the making of *him*, though; and as he didn't do it, I suppose Stephen was quite right not to get him into a bother. But if I hadn't found out, Master Ashton, that he was two miles or so off at that particular moment, you would have had to give in about it!'

It was certainly true that Stephen looked and was rather less miserable. It might have been because of two letters he had himself delivered on his return, one to Mr. Bevan and the other to Annie Morris, the contents of which gave them, as well as him, very great satisfaction and pleasure.

But matters had not much improved at the factory. Greatly to his relief, Smith and his family had emigrated; but though some of his comrades, finding he always kept aloof, except when he could do any of them a service, gradually became more friendly, yet the greater part kept him at a distance, and contrived to make his life far from happy. The foreman, unrestrained by Mr. Charles Spencer's presence, bullied more than ever, till the men themselves wondered at Stephen's patience, and often, in their way, expressed their sympathy.

'It's very kind of you,' he said one evening, when Mr. Markham had been worse than usual, and Carter and another man stopped to speak to him. 'Sometimes it does seem hard that he should always find fault with me, but I must do my best to bear it. At all events, I have had a good training in keeping quiet, and that helps me. Perhaps some day he will be sorry he treated me so unkindly.'

Only a few hours later Stephen's words were quite unexpectedly fulfilled. The men were assembled in the yard after their dinner-hour, talking of a piece of work on which some of them were engaged.

'I wish Ashton would come and help,' said one of them. 'He's worth two or three of us, for a job like this.'

'I've no doubt he would come in a minute,' said Carter, and looking at Stephen, who was as usual standing silently in the background, he called out, 'Ashton, come along here!'

'Yes, what is it?' asked Stephen, moving up to the group.

'We want you to come and give us a hand with that piece of iron over there,' said the first speaker, jerking his head in the direction of a building behind him. 'It's a fearful weight, and it's terrible work hoisting it up.'

'I would come willingly, Simmonds,' returned Stephen, brightening up, as he always did if the others asked him to help them, 'but I hardly like

asking Mr. Markham to let me leave my own work. I shouldn't think he would mind, though. It won't take long, I suppose?'

'No, you'll soon whisk it up,' said one of the men, laughing; 'but it slips back as soon as we get it a little way up, and we have to begin again.'

'I'll ask him if you like, then,' said Stephen, rather hesitatingly, divided between his dislike of speaking to the foreman and his wish to do anything his companions asked him.

'Oh no; we'll ask him,' said Simmonds, who knew how disagreeable it would be to Stephen. 'Here he comes!'

Whatever Mr. Markham's faults might be, he was an excellent foreman, as scrupulously careful of Mr. Spencer's interests as if they had been his own, and as punctual himself as he expected the men to be, and he entered the yard at the first stroke of the bell.

Simmonds instantly accosted him.

'Can Ashton come to the drying shed for half an hour or so, sir? We should be glad of his help with that large iron plate; it is much heavier than we usually have.'

'No doubt he'll be delighted to display his strength,' said the foreman sarcastically. 'We all know how proud he is of it, and how willing to show off even'—

How he was going to finish his sentence was never known, for at that moment he happened to look at Stephen and stopped abruptly. Perhaps a long letter from Annie that morning, and his knowledge that

Charles Spencer would soon be home, had put Stephen into better spirits than usual, for, instead of turning away, as he generally did, without a word, he ventured on a reply.

'Yes, sir, I am proud of it,' he said quietly, as Mr. Markham paused, 'and glad to make it of any use I can to my fellow-men. I do not think there is any harm in that.'

Possibly the foreman felt a little ashamed of himself, for he merely said—

'You can go and help.'

And, little as he then guessed, those few words saved his life.

Simmonds and the others went across the yard, and Mr. Markham, after watching the rest of the men go in to work, followed them to superintend the raising of the plate.

The piece of iron was certainly, as Simmonds had said, a fearful weight, and Mr. Markham could not help secretly admiring Stephen's strength, and the ease with which he prevented it from slipping back when the others stopped to rest. They had just finished, and were standing round it to take breath, when, without any warning, the large crane over their heads collapsed and fell towards them. So sudden and unexpected was the accident that it must inevitably have been fatal to the unfortunate men who were so close to it, had not Stephen interposed. Shouting to the men to stand back, he placed himself

directly in its way, and contrived by a tremendous exertion to divert it from its course, just as it seemed within an inch of their heads. Scarcely knowing what had happened, Mr. Markham and the others rushed to the back of the shed, and the next instant the crane fell, dashing against the supports of the roof as it did so.

On the top of the roof a large quantity of iron was stored, and the cracking and splitting of the supports and the crashing of the iron told the horrified men huddled up in the corner that the roof was falling on them. Fortunately, one of the supports in falling had lodged against an iron bar, which for a moment checked its progress, and Stephen, putting his arms round it and exerting his utmost strength, held it in that position.

'Quick! quick, Simmonds!' he shouted; 'I can't hold it many minutes.'

Simmonds and the others rushed out of the shed, while heavy pieces of iron crashed down from the sides, impeding their progress.

It seemed ages to Stephen before the men were all out, and then he remembered the foreman had not passed him.

'Where's Mr. Markham?' he gasped breathlessly, as Carter came out.

'Behind—coming,' was the reply. 'There's no one else in now.'

At that moment the bar slipped and the support fell.

'Mr. Markham, are you hurt?' shouted Stephen; and receiving no reply he hurried across the shed, regardless of his own danger, and immediately saw what had happened.

The heavy plate of iron the men had just raised had fallen against some iron bars and overbalanced them. Mr. Markham in following the others had been thrown backward, and now lay with a mass of iron hanging over him, threatening every second to come down upon him. Whether he was stunned or was only afraid to move, Stephen did not know, but to his great relief, when he called again Mr. Markham answered.

'Take care, it will be down directly.'

'Are you hurt, sir?' asked Stephen anxiously.

'Not much; only my foot twisted a little. But look after yourself; you can't save me.'

'I'll try, at any rate,' was Stephen's reply.

He pushed back the topmost bars, and then, kneeling down, held the plate firmly.

'Now, sir,' he said; and Mr. Markham was just raising himself, when, with a loud crash, the roof fell.

At the first moment, nearly deafened by the resounding din, Stephen felt sure it was all over with both of them. His thoughts flew to Annie and her distress, and 'mid all the clanging and crashing round him, a swift prayer for her and for himself rose from his heart. Then a piece of iron struck him heavily and he fell forward, half stunned, but still instinctively

grasping the plate of iron which alone kept the bars from falling on Mr. Markham's head.

How long it was he did not know, but when he came to himself again the noise was over, and, to his amazement, he was still alive. Then he saw what had happened. A number of heavy iron bars had fallen in a slanting direction across him, and served as a protection from the pieces of iron that had fallen all round. Whether Mr. Markham was alive or dead, he did not know, and he dared not move to see. He drew a long breath of relief when he heard his voice.

'Are you hurt, Ashton?'

'I think I was stunned for a few minutes, sir—and you?'

'I'm all right—but those bars will be down,' returned Mr. Markham, shuddering, as he saw how close they were to his head.

'Not as long as I hold this plate up,' said Stephen, trying to speak cheerfully.

But his heart sank within him. For himself, he was shielded by the sloping bars, but he knew that only the plate held up those behind, and that the moment he relinquished his hold it would slip forward, and Mr. Markham must inevitably be crushed under a mass of iron. He knew too—what, happily for himself, Mr. Markham did not guess—that his left arm was utterly useless, and that the whole tremendous weight was resting on one arm.

Would they think it hopeless to attempt to rescue

them? and if they did try, how long would it take them, and how long could he hold out? He tightened his grasp on the plate, and set himself determinately to hold on to the last, and if his senses failed him, he could do no more.

'Ashton!'

Stephen looked down, and meeting Mr. Markham's eyes, he read in them what the other could not say.

'Never mind, sir,' he said, with a quiet smile. 'If we live, perhaps you will not think so badly of me for the future, and if we die—why, then it will not have mattered much. At all events, let us forget all that *now*.'

Mr. Markham did not say any more. He knew too well that his life depended on Stephen's power of endurance, and dared not say anything likely to upset him.

'Is it impossible to get out?' he asked, after some minutes had passed, which seemed to them like hours.

'Yes, I'm afraid it is, sir; the least movement might bring something down on us. Our only hope is to keep quite still till they can get to us.'

'Do you think they will try?'

'Oh yes; they'll soon find out we are alive,' returned Stephen, with difficulty suppressing a groan, as an attempt to turn slightly round made him aware that he was badly hurt. His cramped kneeling position was becoming more and more painful every instant, his arm getting more numbed, and he felt

that he was rapidly getting exhausted. If they did not make haste, it would be too late to save Mr. Markham after all. Even now he had to exert himself to the utmost to keep off the faintness that was stealing over him.

'Hold on a minute longer, Ashton!' cried Mr. Markham suddenly. 'They are coming.'

A sound of voices, a rush of feet, and then a loud shout.

'Ashton! Mr. Markham! Ashton! Are you alive?'

'Yes. Here!' Mr. Markham called in reply.

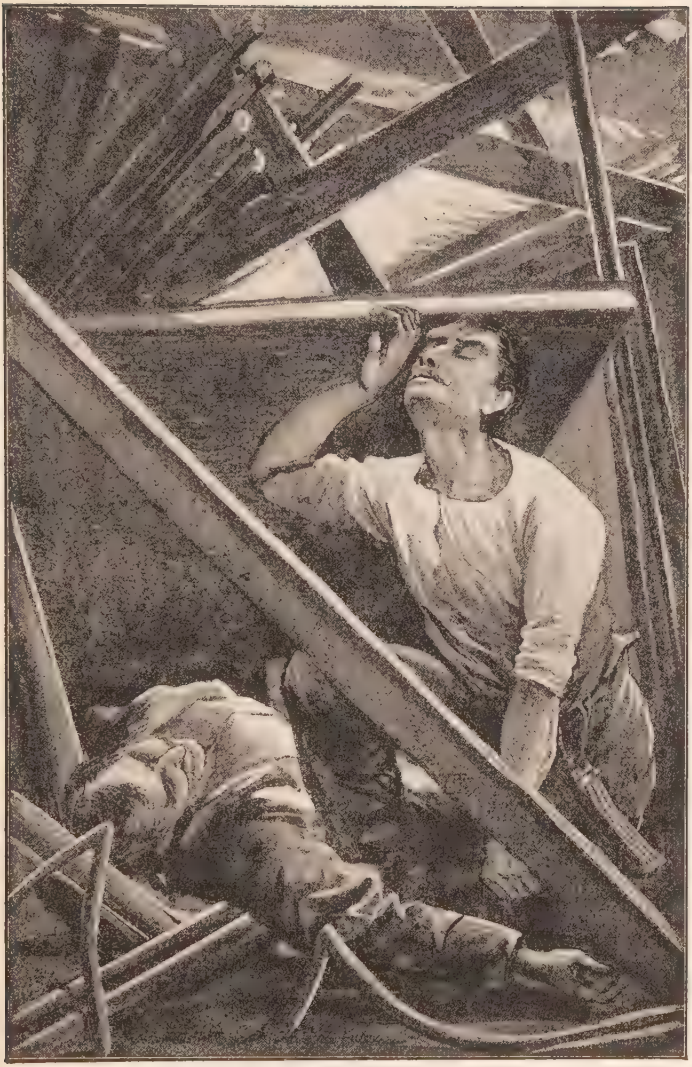
'Thank God,' murmured Stephen faintly.

'Steady, men, steady!' shouted an authoritative voice outside. 'Don't be in a hurry, or you'll bring those bars down on them. Get away the plates at the bottom first. Keep back there, will you! All right, Mr. Markham; we'll have you out in a minute. Simmonds, lift that bar down. Now, Carter, help those fellows to hold up that plate. You can let go, Ashton, we have got hold of it now.'

'Take Mr. Markham out first!' gasped Stephen, scarcely conscious.

'He's all safe, Ashton,' returned the police inspector, who was directing the men. 'Where are you hurt?'

But Stephen made no reply. With his stiffened arm still outstretched and his clenched hand still holding the iron plate, he had fainted.



'A bad job, I fancy,' muttered the inspector, as he put his arm under Stephen's head. 'How he held out so long is more than I can tell. Jackson, get in the other side and unloose his fingers and help me to hold him up; we can't lift him out yet. Some of you fetch Dr. Wilson as quick as you can.'

There was no lack of volunteers. Two or three men rushed off in different directions in search of the doctor, and some pressed forward, eager to assist in releasing Stephen from his cramped position. But this proved to be a work of some little difficulty.

The plates of iron heaped all round him prevented the men from getting near enough to lift him steadily, and the inspector, knowing that any sudden jolt might cause some fatal injury, even if that had not happened already, desired them to move away the nearest plates before attempting to touch him. The men worked with a will, and in a few minutes had cleared a space; and then, under the inspector's directions, they raised Stephen from his kneeling position and laid him gently, still unconscious, on a heap of coats they hastily spread on the ground.

CHAPTER XI

'AS HE WOULD WISH'

FOR some minutes after they had laid him down the men stood in awe-struck silence, looking on the apparently lifeless form of the man whose strength, only a few short minutes before, they had all been admiring. That he was badly hurt they needed no doctor to tell them. In their work most of them had seen some accident, fortunately of a slight description as a rule, but this time they knew it was a more serious matter.

And they knew something more. Whether he lived or died, he had risked his life to save them. Had they deserved it at his hands? Whether he was guilty or innocent, had they been acting as Christians in heaping insult and scorn upon him? Out of the twenty men whose wives and children had to thank the 'ticket-of-leave' that they were not that day widows and fatherless, only one could, with

a clear conscience, say that he had *never* given him an unkind word, even though he *had* believed him guilty. In spite of his sorrow at what he feared was the sudden end of a troubled life, as he laid Stephen's useless arm carefully on the ground, Carter experienced a feeling of satisfaction that at least he had no need to reproach himself. And few in the yard could say the same.

Poor Mr. Markham, who had been lifted from his perilous position and placed in a chair brought from the office, overcome by his own wonderful escape and by remorse for his past unkindness to his preserver, kept entreating the bystanders to do something to bring Stephen round again, and, regardless of the pain he was suffering from his injured foot, refused to be taken to his house or to leave the yard till he had heard what the doctor said.

'Don't crowd round him,' the inspector said, trying to keep the men back. 'He is better left alone till the doctor comes.'

After a few minutes Stephen began to moan a little, as if becoming conscious of pain, and presently he gave a gasp and opened his eyes.

'Done for, I think,' he said slowly, looking up at Jackson, who was kneeling beside him. 'I am glad Mr. Markham and the others are safe. Give my love to Annie, and tell her it is better so. It has been hard to bear, and there will be no one up there—to say unkind things—and it will be better for her,

perhaps. She might have found it made her unhappy —to hear them speak against me. Thank you for all your kindness, Harry—and please thank Williams and O'Brien—and the others who have been—kind to me.'

The report of the accident had spread, and the yard was crowded, but there was a hush as Stephen spoke, and in the silence even his faint voice was heard—heard only too well. How many of those standing round would have given much *not* to have heard, or to have been able to count themselves with 'Williams and the others?' Jackson attempted to speak and failed, but O'Brien pushed his way through the crowd, and threw himself down by his friend. 'You're not done for,' he exclaimed impetuously. 'I'll not believe it, just when we're all proud of you. There's none of the boys will say anything of an unkind word to you again, if you'll only get well.'

'Good old Paddy,' said Stephen, with a smile. 'You've been a good friend all through.'

'Out of the way, O'Brien,' said a voice behind him, 'and let me get to him. Lift his head a little, Jackson, and make him drink this. That's right,' as Stephen obediently swallowed a strong restorative. 'Don't talk, Ashton; keep quite still, and let me see what's the matter.'

A very brief examination satisfied Dr. Wilson, and he beckoned the inspector on one side.

'Where can we take him?' he said. 'It's much

too far to his own house. Ah! here is the rector; he'll tell us what to do.'

The men made way for Mr. Bevan, who had hastened to the spot on hearing what had happened.

'Is he alive?' he asked anxiously.

'Yes, but he is terribly hurt, and the strain has exhausted him frightfully. It's all but hopeless, I'm afraid, but I want to see to him at once. Where can we take him?'

Several of the men pressed forward with eager offers, but Mr. Bevan said decidedly—

'Take him to the rectory. I'll just speak to him, and then go and get everything ready for you.'

He stooped over Stephen, who had closed his eyes and was evidently suffering greatly, and said a few words in a low tone.

'I did my best,' whispered Stephen, opening his eyes. 'Was that using it as He would wish?'

'Yes, indeed, my dear fellow, and now He wants you to be brave and patient.'

Stephen smiled, and the rector, with a few more comforting words, hurried off.

'Now, Ashton,' said Dr. Wilson cheerfully, as Stephen looked up at him inquiringly, 'the sooner we get you over to the rectory the better. You mustn't mind the pain; you'll be easier when I've put you to rights a bit, I hope. We'll try and hurt you as little as possible, and I'll soon have you comfortably in bed.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Stephen faintly, and, glancing at the men who came forward, he went on in a whisper, 'No—no; don't trouble them, Harry. Can't you and O'Brien carry me?'

'Yes, we will, Stephen,' Jackson was beginning, when one of the others interrupted him.

'We'll be very careful, Ashton. You have saved our lives—won't you let us do this for you?'

'It's not that,' gasped Stephen; 'only I thought —you wouldn't—like it.'

'Don't talk,' put in Dr. Wilson peremptorily. 'Lift him steadily, while I hold his arm; it is broken, I see. It is impossible to help hurting you, my poor fellow,' as Stephen gave a faint groan when the men touched him; 'it would only be worse to wait.'

An extemporised stretcher had been hastily made, and when Stephen was laid on it he looked round the yard, as if thinking he might never see it again. The men were just lifting him when from the crowd round broke a murmur, which was so obviously a suppressed cheer, that a flush of pleasure coloured Stephen's deadly pale face.

'Why, how good of them!' he said wonderingly. 'I haven't done much.'

Before the doctor could stop him, he raised himself on his elbow.

'Thank you,' he went on, making an effort to speak distinctly. 'I am very glad I was able to'— A sudden gasp, and he fell back.

Jackson looked at Dr. Wilson, and the bystanders held their breath as he put his fingers on Stephen's wrist.

'No,' he said, answering their unspoken thoughts, 'he is only insensible. Go on, and don't shake him more than you can help.'

It was some hours before he regained his senses, and then it was to suffer so terribly that poor Annie Morris, who had been hastily summoned by the rector, was almost thankful when he relapsed again into insensibility. So it went on for days. In his rare intervals of consciousness he appeared to be in too much pain to speak, though he evidently knew the rector, and tried to smile at Annie when she spoke to him. Now and then he said a few words to her, trying to comfort her and to persuade her that she would be far better without him, as there would be sure to be some who would say things had been wrong, even if matters were cleared up; and once he asked Mr. Bevan to tell Mr. Charles that now he need not say anything. But he was generally too weak to wish to disobey Dr. Wilson's orders that he should keep perfectly quiet, and not exert himself to talk.

Little did he know what a change had taken place in the feelings of his fellow-workmen, it might be said of the whole town. The rector could have told of the messengers sent constantly from the factory, of the number of inquiries made when he went about

the town, of the hush that fell on the congregation assembled on the Sunday following, when he asked their prayers for Stephen Ashton, who was in great danger and suffering.

He could have told, too, of Mr. Markham's deep gratitude; and no one but the rector ever knew that he could not rest till he had persuaded Dr. Wilson to consult another medical man, that at least he might feel convinced that neither money nor skill had been spared in trying to save the man to whom he owed his life. So one day, after a long interval of pain, Stephen was roused by seeing an unknown gentleman, with a keen, clever face, bending over him.

'Don't disturb yourself, Ashton,' he said kindly, seeing Stephen's startled look; 'Dr. Wilson thinks two heads are better than one, so I have just come to have a look at you.'

Nor did Stephen guess that the stranger, whose skilful hands touched him with such care that they seemed rather to quiet the pain than to increase it, was the most eminent surgeon in all the surrounding counties. And though the great man could only make some suggestions for alleviating the pain and keeping up his strength, still he did say that, though Stephen was in a very critical condition, he did not consider the case was absolutely hopeless; and this much cheered Stephen's friends.

One thing Dr. Wilson declared was greatly in his favour, and that was his perfect obedience and self-

control. He was always quiet and patient, and even if in great pain or half unconscious, would lie perfectly still if told to do so, only whispering a request that the rector or Annie would 'read something.'

But as the days passed on a faint hope began to steal into Annie's heart that the pain was gradually diminishing, and upon her venturing to say so to Dr. Wilson, in much fear lest he should quench that hope, to her great delight he agreed with her. And at last there came a morning when Stephen awoke from a long tranquil sleep so much refreshed and in so much less pain, that the doctor expressed his opinion that he was decidedly better, though he gave sundry warnings against building too much on an improvement that might be only temporary.

O'Brien, who came as usual for a report before going to work, rushed off to the factory in such an uncontrollable state of agitation that the men concluded that Stephen was worse; and it was some minutes before they discovered that it was good news, not bad, that had so upset him. Great was their delight as each day Stephen slowly but steadily improved, and many were the kindly messages sent him as soon as he was able to receive them. Very much astonished, and not a little moved, was he by the friendly feeling his companions seemed so anxious to show, and their evident wish to make him understand that for the future he would find himself treated very differently.

There was no lack of volunteer nurses, and when Annie Morris was at last persuaded to leave him and take some much-needed rest, she received so many offers to sit up with him that she had some difficulty in choosing. Stephen himself much preferred, as was only natural, his old and constant friends, and at first Annie thought it best that only Jackson or Williams should see him, and as it was found impossible to keep him out, the impetuous O'Brien was also admitted. If Stephen had a little dread of the latter's exuberant delight being more than he could bear, he kept it to himself, and one visit convinced him that, however full of fun the Irishman might be at other times, in a sick-room he could be quiet and gentle enough, while his unfailing spirits greatly lightened the long hours of a slow recovery.

But when Mr. Bevan hinted that some of the other men wanted to show their gratitude and their regret for the past by sitting up with him, he agreed at once. When they came in, rather uncomfortably, having received many instructions not to say anything referring to the accident, and yet feeling that they ought in some way to express their thanks, he put out his thin hand to shake hands with them, and thanked them for coming.

Perhaps he was not sorry that Dr. Wilson absolutely refused to allow Mr. Markham to see him for some time, and it was not till Stephen was well enough to sit up for a few hours every day that they

met. In spite of the doctor's peremptory orders, Mr. Markham was so agitated that all attempts at speech failed, and it was Stephen who came to the rescue.

'I don't want to be thanked, sir,' he said in his weak voice. 'It has made me very happy to know that I have made a good use at last of the strength that has been given me. As for the rest, please let us forget all about it. Everybody is so very kind to me now, that I do not want to think about the past at all.'

'I can never tell you what I feel,' said Mr. Markham, recovering himself, 'and after the way I have behaved to you, of course you cannot care for my thanks.'

'Indeed I do, sir,' returned Stephen earnestly. 'I think it is very pleasant to be thanked. Only I don't want you to make too much of it. It is a great pleasure to me to think I was able to be of use to you and the others, and I do feel very glad to know that'—

'That what?' asked Mr. Markham, as Stephen hesitated.

'That I shall get on better at the factory, I was going to say,' Stephen said, colouring slightly.

Mr. Markham was silent.

'Ashton,' he said, after a pause, 'it seems rather a mean thing to say that I will behave differently to you now, just because you have saved my life, but'—

'You are not obliged to, you know,' interrupted

Stephen, venturing to laugh, and holding out his hand, 'but I think I'll risk it, sir! Perhaps if you would shake hands with me, I might feel *quite* easy about it.'

Mr. Markham shook his hand warmly, without speaking.

'Now that is all over and done with,' Stephen went on, in a tone of great satisfaction, 'and I hope you won't think any more about it. I shan't get quite strong for some time, I'm afraid, but I must come back to work as soon as I can, if you won't mind my not working hard at first.'

'No, I should think not,' said Mr. Markham; 'you must not think of that for a long while. When you can come, I will find you some light work to do.'

'There! you see how you are going to spoil me,' said Stephen, smiling. 'Ah, here's Annie come to say I have been talking enough, I suppose! but you'll come and see me another day, won't you, sir?'

'Yes, if you will let me,' replied Mr. Markham. 'Good-bye, Ashton.'

'Good-bye, sir,' returned Stephen.

Mr. Markham looked at the quiet, determined face before him and the dark eyes raised to his, and a strange thought crossed his mind that they had all been mistaken.

'If he really was innocent after all,' he said to himself, as he closed the door, 'how abominably we have treated him, and how splendidly he has behaved!'

CHAPTER XII

'WHAT HE DOES IS RIGHT'

NE fine morning in July found the inhabitants of Arlingham in an unusual state of excitement, and strangely enough for a reason which, a few months before, most of them would have disdainfully declared did not in the least interest them. It was Stephen Ashton's wedding-day, and at that particular time Stephen Ashton was the hero of Arlingham.

Moreover, through the length and breadth of the town, and even outside it, great curiosity and wonder had been roused by the extraordinary way in which Mr. Charles Spencer was behaving on the occasion. He had returned from his voyage in good health, and apparently in excellent spirits, and, on hearing that Stephen was going to get married, he had made two remarkable announcements.

One, that he would give all the men in his employment a holiday for the day; and the other,

that he intended to give Ashton a wedding breakfast in the factory, and that he specially desired that all his men should be present at it. Many others in the town also received invitations.

'What does Spencer mean, my dear rector?' asked the magistrate who had committed Stephen for trial, and who had been asked by Mr. Charles to come in for a few minutes. 'Doesn't it seem to you very odd that he should make all this fuss about that fellow?'

'Very odd, Colonel Waters,' replied Mr. Bevan gravely, but with a twinkle in his eye. 'Almost as strange as that "that fellow" should have voluntarily risked his life to save those who, I am terribly afraid, have been treating him very cruelly.'

'Well, I shall look in and see what it means,' returned the other; 'for I confess I don't understand it.'

As the morning went on a good deal of interest and some curiosity brought most of the good folks of Arlingham to the spot, and when Stephen arrived, looking very happy but certainly a little embarrassed, he found the church nearly full. He had not long to wait, for Annie came in a few minutes, accompanied by a special friend, and escorted by the proud and delighted Sidney. As she came up the church, however, Charles Spencer stepped forward, and, to complete the amazement of the congregation, it became evident that he was going to give her away.

Certainly they were a very good-looking couple;

though they were very thoughtful, and evidently did not consider the service which was to bind them together for life as one to be gone through lightly and carelessly, as a mere form or a piece of fun. Yet, probably because of their deep feeling, no one could doubt that they looked excessively happy.

And Mr. Bevan, as he joined their hands together, felt that few had a better promise of a happy life than the man who had patiently endured a terrible trial, and whose character, like the precious metal, shone the brighter for the fire through which it had passed, and the woman whose faith and love had never faltered, and who had been loyal and true in trouble as well as in joy, alike through 'evil report and good report.' Mr. Bevan's voice faltered as he gave them the blessing, and earnestly did he thank God that the lad whose life he had watched so anxiously, whose passionate temper had caused him so much anxiety, by His good guiding and in His good way had been able to conquer the dragon.

When it was over Stephen and Annie made their way to the factory, and Stephen was promptly dragged by the excited O'Brien into the office, where several of the men were assembled. Simmonds, as spokesman, thereupon informed him that they wished to give him something to remember them by, and finding it difficult to get on with his speech, ended it abruptly by pointing to a handsome clock, on which was an inscription, setting forth that it was given him as a

token of the gratitude they felt for the brave deed that had saved so many lives.

Stephen was so utterly upset by the unexpected gift, that he could only stammer incoherently that it was very kind of them, and he should value it immensely, and so would Annie; but his evident pleasure satisfied the donors as well, or far better, than a longer speech would have done.

After that they proceeded to the breakfast—such a breakfast as certainly no Arlingham 'factory hand' had ever indulged in at his wedding before. Mr. Spencer presided, with Mr. Bevan at his side and Stephen and Annie at his right hand. At the other end of the table sat Mr. Markham, who had given Stephen no cause to regret his return to work. Indeed, Stephen declared that, what with the men who kept insisting on helping him, and what with Mr. Markham, who was always urging him to be careful not to overtire himself, he did not believe he did a proper day's work in a week.

By the time the breakfast was nearly over, Colonel Waters and several of the neighbouring gentry came in, and the room was crowded when Charles Spencer rose, and everyone turned towards him eager to hear what he had to say.

'I suppose I shall not be far wrong,' he began, 'if I take it for granted that you have all been thinking it a very extraordinary thing that I should wish to show in this public way my regard for Stephen

Ashton—for the man you all (or at least all but two or three) consider to have been justly punished for a crime which you would expect me to be the last to forget, even if I were willing to forgive. I have asked you to meet me here to-day that I might tell you something which will make you think very differently of him and, I fear, of me. You will all understand that it is very painful for me to have to say that, in spite of his terrible punishment, he was innocent, and that I'—Mr. Spencer's voice sank, but he went on bravely, though his face was white with the effort—'I knew it.'

He paused for a moment, and looked round the table. Not a sound broke the silence; and, little as he guessed it, the chief feeling of his hearers at that moment was pity for and sympathy with him. Stephen was leaning forward, with his face hidden by his hands; and Mr. Bevan, a good deal moved, laid his hand with a warm, sympathetic pressure on the clenched fingers that rested on the table beside him.

'It is not necessary for me to explain to you all that happened,' Mr. Spencer went on; 'it is enough to say that I was in great money trouble. To my disgrace be it said, I had been gambling heavily, and had incurred debts which I had no means of paying. Driven to desperation by threats of exposure which meant ruin to me and to my father, I was mad enough to do that which placed me completely in the power

of a villain who called himself my friend, and who from that moment bullied and threatened me till I was almost beside myself, and dreaded every day that the next would find me a ruined and disgraced man. Circumstances had made me afraid that Ashton might find out what it was my strenuous aim to keep concealed, and I was mean enough to annoy him perpetually, hoping he would go away, though I feared to dismiss him. At last, on that unlucky morning, exasperated by my taunts, Ashton retaliated in a way that showed me beyond all doubt that my fears were fulfilled, and that I was at the mercy of the man whose hasty temper was well known. A few hours later I heard he had threatened me in words which were taken to mean an intention to revenge himself by violence, though their real meaning was far different. Having arranged to meet my persecutor that evening, I determined to make him give up a paper, the possession of which would enable me to scoff at any rumours that might get abroad. We met in the field, and had a furious quarrel; but, partly by money and partly by threats, I succeeded in making him give up the paper. I had just put it into my pocket-book when Ashton came up, and my companion, not wishing to be seen, slipped behind a tree. Thinking he had seen us together, I accused him of spying upon me, and, too angry to be prudent, told him that I was out of his power now, and should take the first opportunity of

getting rid of him. I remembered afterwards that I had heard Ashton say that he had only come to apologise for what he had said, but at the time—this, at least, was true—I was too excited to listen, and when he turned away and by some accident I stumbled against him, I really believed he had intended to strike me. I had in my hand a sharp-pointed tool, which I had taken to use as a means of intimidation, and, mad with rage, I struck at him with all my might. Of course he was taken by surprise; and had he not been exceedingly prompt in parrying the blow, matters would indeed have ended very differently, and I should have been—a murderer.'

Mr. Spencer paused again, and a long-drawn breath told how intently his hearers were following every word. Mr. Bevan silently pushed a glass of water towards him, which he drank half unconsciously, and then went on.

'Happily for me, Ashton caught hold of my arms, and, as you may well suppose, had no difficulty in holding me back, and as I struggled to release myself he kept begging me to be quiet, as he was afraid I should hurt myself. Almost as he spoke, my hand slipped and the tool cut a sharp gash in my wrist. The sight of the blood quieted me at once, and Ashton, who had not in the slightest degree lost his temper, let go my arms immediately and bound up the wound, fastening his own handkerchief on the top of mine, which was instantly soaked. I am told that when I

was delirious I referred to this, and asked him to let go, and appealed to him for help, as I actually did at the time. As soon as Ashton had succeeded in stopping the blood, he expressed his regret at what had happened, and assured me that he had no intention of telling a secret he had discovered by chance; and he gave me his most solemn promise that under no circumstances whatever would he say one word of the matter. How he kept that promise' —Mr. Spencer's voice shook—'when by breaking it he might have explained his hasty words and thrown a doubt upon my character; kept his word, even to his own hindrance, you all know. The rest of the story is soon told. Though I did not see who struck me, I felt sure who it was when I found the paper had been taken from my pocket-book; but, partly because I dared not throw any suspicion on him, and partly because I wanted to get rid of Ashton, I made the most of my injuries, and allowed it to be supposed that I remembered nothing, quieting my conscience by stating what was perfectly true, though not the whole truth. But this I can honestly say, and I beg of you to believe me,'—Mr. Spencer leant forward and spoke with great earnestness—'that I had no idea he would get so heavy a sentence; and I think I may with truth say that I suffered nearly as much as he did. When he returned, the shame I felt at the sight of him and his patience in his miserable life, added to the feeling that I ought to clear him, was

seriously injuring my health, when something in his manner on the day he carried me off the bridge made me feel that he knew all about it, and had forgiven me. As you know, I sent for him, and his generous forgiveness did as much as his good nursing to help me to recover. All this is very painful for me, but the only reparation I can make is to clear Ashton from every shadow of disgrace, and to express my great regret for the past. I am sure you will join heartily with me in wishing him every happiness—happiness which you will agree he well deserves.'

Mr. Spencer turned to Stephen as he concluded and held out his hand, and Stephen, who had been sitting motionless all the time, rose in much agitation and silently shook it; while the men, who had been listening in profound silence to Mr. Spencer's words, relieved their feelings by a storm of applause. Probably such enthusiastic cheers had never been heard before in Arlingham, and if anything could have made Stephen feel that the terrible past was really over, it was the warm feeling his comrades showed.

He tried to speak, but could not manage more than a very choky 'Thank you,' and Mr. Bevan whispered to him to sit down and wait. Mr. Spencer took some papers from his pocket and handed them to Colonel Waters, who read them attentively and returned them.

'I ought to tell you,' Mr. Spencer went on, 'that

I have here a letter from Smith, in which he confesses that he heard the clock strike ten when Ashton was talking to him, and knew he had mentioned it, but, having quarrelled with him, he took this means of revenging himself. Ashton's reason for refusing to say anything about his knife was that he had lent it to young Morris, and, not knowing how much he might have been mixed up in it, did not want to throw suspicion on him, knowing how terribly it would distress his father. I hope I shall not pain Mrs. Ashton by saying that her brother was also involved, and that the knife had changed hands, and must have fallen from the pocket of my assailant when he struck me; but neither Ashton nor I guessed this. Morris has written a statement that the knife was not in Ashton's possession for at least a fortnight before that unhappy evening, but, like myself, he dared not say so. Like myself, too, he made a resolution to live differently for the future, and it may be some consolation to Ashton to know that his suffering has been the means of doing us good, and stopping a career which would in the end have ruined us both. You will not wonder that I feel I cannot do enough to make up to Ashton for the misery he has undergone. But I hope to make some slight amends. While I was away I saw some new work that I think would be very advantageous to us here, and I propose to send him out with Mrs. Ashton for a year, to learn it thoroughly, after which I hope he will return and

take the management of the work in a building which I intend to erect for that purpose. As he has agreed to this, I trust, in spite of the miserable past, we have many years of pleasant friendship still before us.'

A loud murmur of approval greeted Mr. Spencer's concluding remarks, and then some of the men began whispering together, and one of them got up.

'I wish to say, sir, on behalf of myself and my mates, that we think it very good of you to have told us all this, and we are very sorry for the way we behaved to Ashton, and hope he'll forgive us.'

'Of course I have, long ago,' said Stephen, springing up impetuously. 'It was all a mistake, and though I was very miserable, I had some very kind friends all the time, and I'm sure you have all been very good to me lately. It is all done with and over now; please don't let us say any more about it. Mr. Spencer has made me out far better than I really was. At first I was very angry, and I'm afraid for a little while I hated him and Smith, and thought it was very hard I should have all this to bear when I did not deserve it. But something Mr. Bevan once said to me kept coming into my mind, and I began to feel not so sure whether I did not deserve it, and to think it was all quite right. I don't know how to explain what I mean, but perhaps the rector will tell you. I'm afraid I gave most of you good cause to dislike me, and if I had not been so insolent to Mr. Spencer

he would not have been afraid of my saying anything against him; so it was really brought about by my bad temper. I am sure Mr. Spencer has done his best to make amends, and I am very grateful to him for clearing me so completely. I tried to prevent him from saying any more than that I was innocent, but he would not be satisfied with that, for fear you should think it was only his idea, unless you heard the whole story. He has not told you all he has done for me—in fact, he has rather made out that by giving me a chance of learning better work he is advancing his own interest! But, besides this, he has given me a very nice little house for a wedding present, and my—wife'—Stephen hesitated over the unaccustomed word—'fifty pounds to furnish it when we come back, so that I must consider myself a very lucky fellow. I am very glad you should know I was not so bad as you thought me, and I am sure you will all feel, as I do, a greater respect and regard for Mr. Spencer after the brave way he has spoken, when it must have cost him so much. I hope, sir,' turning to him, 'you will not vex yourself any more about it, and will not think of it again. I shall do my best to learn what you want me to do, and I hope when I come back you will find me able to do the work you have been good enough to offer me.'

Another loud murmur of approval greeted his words, and poor Charles Spencer, who had imagined that everyone would despise him, was quite overcome

by the cordial way in which Mr. Bevan, Colonel Waters, and several other friends, grasped his hand in sympathy and approval. When Stephen had, rather to his embarrassment, received their expressions of regret and their good wishes, he suggested that they should take this opportunity of congratulating Mr. Spencer on his restored health; and the applause that followed showed that his men quite agreed that their employer had done his best to retrieve the past.

'Before we break up,' the rector said presently, 'Ashton wishes me to tell you why he thinks that, though he seems to have suffered unjustly, it was, as he said just now, all quite right. For one thing, he feels that it was the indulgence of his passionate temper that made people so ready to attribute this deed to him. It is true that he did try at times to get the better of it, but he owns that the fact of being so strong made him more indifferent to the quarrels in which it involved him than he ought to have been, and though innocent of this, he was often guilty of angry thoughts, which were, in God's sight, quite as wicked. But he and I would rather think that all this trouble was sent by One who knows what is best for each of us, and who knew this was the best way of helping him to conquer his besetting sin. He had told me just before that he was beginning to despair of ever getting the better of it, and who can tell whether he might not have given up trying and been led on to some deed which would have caused him lifelong

sorrow? I know he feels that, terrible as the trial was, it was sent in love and mercy; and I am sure he will all his life have cause to say that it was good for him to have been in trouble. We may well be proud of the strength which made him able to do so much for us; yet we know that far greater was the strength which enabled him to win the victory over himself, to forgive those who had wronged him, to be patient and forbearing under undeserved scorn and contempt. Well was it for him that he accepted the trial in the right spirit, not considering it an act of man's injustice, but of God's justice, and believing that what He does must always be right. So He who watched over him through all his trouble, and knew him to be bearing it rightly, has given him back all he thought he had lost, and will, we trust, make his future life happy and prosperous. For He who honour best bestows, in His own good time and in His own good way, *has* given him double.'

THE END

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